For the Queen's Sake

Evelyn Everett Green

"Cheering for the Queen."

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T. NELSON & SONS

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FOR THE QUEEN'S SAKE

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FOR THE QUEEN'S SAKE.

CHAPTER I.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

"YOU would do me proud, sir, if you'd take him," said the steward, his hand upon the dog's head.

The child stood looking wistfully at his playmate, eagerness and doubt struggling for mastery in his face.

"He's took a fancy to you, sir," continued the man, "and I'd like to know he was goin' to a good home."

"But I don't know exactly where it is I'm going to," said the little boy. "I don't know anything about England. Pat says it isn't a bit like India, anyhow."

"But you are going to your grandmother, sir, and Pat says it's a mighty fine place where your grandmother lives.

Little Sir Caspar nodded his head several times

thoughtfully. He had heard tales of the grandeur awaiting him several times already. But somehow he was in no hurry for the voyage to end. He thought the steward's quarters in this big ship much more attractive than anything he was likely to come across in the unknown country whither he was bound.

Since reaching northern latitudes the child had exchanged his white clothes for a suit of the deepest black. His small, pale face looked smaller and paler for the change into these sombre garments; and the very wearing of them had served to remind Caspar more forcibly than before of the double loss he had so recently sustained.

He was the only child of his parents, and his father had held an important post in India under government. Caspar had been born out there, and had never yet seen the country his father and mother always spoke of as "home." He had long been promised that when he was seven years old he should "go home" with his parents and make the acquaintance of his grandmother there.

The child was now seven, although he hardly looked as much; he was upon his homeward way to his grandmother's house—but his parents were not with him. They had "gone home" in another sense; and the little boy was already growing used to hear himself addressed by the name which had once belonged to his father, and did not start and change colour at hearing himself called "Sir Caspar."

His mother had died first, very suddenly, three months ago. The shock to her husband had been very great, and it was the more felt, perhaps, because they were already making preparation for the long-planned visit to England, and their hearts had been so full of joyous anticipations.

Hard work had kept Sir Caspar fast to his post, and had given him little time for outward mourning. But there were some amongst his colleagues who had said at the time that he had received a blow from which he would be long in recovering, and they had urged him to get away at once with his child before he should break down altogether.

But Sir Caspar was not a man to leave his work in confusion, and he toiled on through the sweltering Indian heat, putting things in order before he departed. And in the great bungalow, which seemed so empty and silent without the gentle presence of its mistress, the child roamed solitary and wondering, musing over many things he could not understand, and watching always for his father's return, when he would nestle up to his side, or sit at his feet in silent contentment, feeling safe and happy when he was present, but always anxious and fearful during his daily absences.

Then had come that terrible day which Caspar could not bear to think of even yet—a day which seemed the beginning of a strange, misty period, of which he retained no clear recollections.

His father had gone out, as usual, early in the

morning, before the heat of the day commenced. He was carried home a few hours later, and there had been confusion and hurrying to and fro, the arrival of the doctor, and of the wife of one of their great friends, who had come and taken Caspar away (reluctant but submissive) to her own home. Then came the terrible news that his father had "gone to mother" in that strange country fenced about with so much mystery to us all, from which the traveller never returns; and little Caspar had come at last to understand that he would have to take the voyage to England alone, or at least with only Pat for company.

But by that time everything had grown so strange and unreal to the little boy that nothing astonished him any more. He lived in the house of the kind friends who had been loved by his parents, and everything seemed so like a dream that he did not know how time went, or what was happening, or anything about it.

What he remembered best when he thought about those days was the way the lady had kissed him and cried when he went away, and how her husband had given him in charge to the captain of the big ship, and patted him on the head, and told him to grow up a brave and good boy, so as to be worthy of the name he bore.

Soon after that the great ship had begun to glide through the blue, blue water, and little Sir Caspar Adair had found himself alone with faithful Pat in

quite a new little world—the world of a big steam-boat.

He and Pat had a little state-room to themselves; and very glad the little boy was of this when first he began to feel shaky and ill, as he soon did after they were once off.

Patrick Malony had been a faithful servant of his father's for many, many years. Once he had been a soldier; but he had been disabled for service by a severe wound, and had been in the service of the Adair family almost ever since. Caspar could not remember a time when Pat had not been his playmate and faithful guardian, and the companionship of the old servant seemed the one link which now existed between the new life and the old.

Every one on board was interested in the little frail-looking, white-faced child with the pathetic history, and everybody tried to make friends with him when he appeared on deck or at table.

Caspar always tried to be polite to everybody; but he did not make friends very readily. He was rather bewildered by all the new faces, and he was happier when pacing up and down with Pat than when seated in the midst of a group of ladies all trying to make much of him. He was grateful for their kindness, but it embarrassed him a good deal. He sometimes confided to the captain (who was soon established as one of his favourites and friends) that he thought it would be a much nicer arrangement if the ladies had

one end of the ship to themselves and the men the other.

"Then we could go and see them if we wanted them," he explained. "But they wouldn't be always there when we didn't. The ladies are pretty to look at, but they make a fuss. I like men best. And when I'm a captain" (Caspar had already decided that he would be a ship's captain one day), "I don't think I shall take any ladies on my ship—or, at any rate, only just a very few quite nice ones. I shall have a men's ship, and Mr. Haddow can have a ladies' one, he likes them so much. We can settle it all quite nicely like that. He can send me his men, and I can send him my ladies."

Mr. Haddow was a young lieutenant serving on the ship, who had a predilection for the society of the ladies. So this remark of little Sir Caspar's was treasured up for his benefit, and became a standing joke against him all through the voyage, though the youthful baronet was quite unaware of this.

Next to the captain amongst Caspar's favourites came the steward. The steward had been exceedingly kind to the delicate little boy, who had been weak and ill during the first week of the voyage, and he had ransacked his stores and his brain to contrive little delicacies to tempt his appetite. He and Pat had become great cronies during this period, and often the steward would sit for an hour in the small state-room telling stories and keeping the child amused and happy.

When Caspar had found his sea-legs, one of the first visits he paid was to the steward's quarters; and here he found much to amuse and interest him, first and foremost being a pair of fine white-and brindled bull-dogs—mother and son—in whom the child became greatly interested.

"Queen Bess" was the name of the mother, and the steward was never tired of relating anecdotes of her intelligence and courage and fidelity. Her son was little more than a pup, and had not yet attained his full growth, although developing rapidly. His name was "William Shakespeare," the steward having been recommended to bestow that high-sounding appellation upon the son of "Queen Bess." But Bill was the name by which he habitually went, and he was probably in ignorance of any other.

It was of "William Shakespeare" that the steward was speaking when he asked Caspar's acceptance of the young dog.

"I should love to have him," said the child; "but," and here he hesitated and got rather red, for he did not want to hurt his friend's feelings, neither did he want to impose upon his kindness—"but don't you think you ought to sell him? Isn't he worth a good deal of money? Didn't you say that 'Queen Bess' had taken a prize, and that Bill might too?"

"No, sir; I don't think Bill would take a prize. He's not got the points of his mother. I did sell the other pups for a good price, but I kept the least like-

liest, because things is a bit risky on ship-board. And Bill must go now. The captain's very good. He lets me have "Queen Bess" aboard, for she's a rare one with the rats, and she knows her manners, and is used to the life; but the young 'un 'll have to go when we gets ashore. I couldn't expect anything else. And as he's took such a fancy to you, and you've a good home to take him to, I'd be proud and pleased for you to have him. You'll find him a nice companion, and you'll never want no other takin' care of if you've got Bill at your heels; you may be sure of that."

Bill sat upon the table with a smile upon his blunt, ugly face. His mouth was half open and his tongue lolled out, whilst his eyes travelled from face to face of the two speakers, as though he understood what they were saying. Caspar came up and put his small hand into the dog's hot mouth. Bill smiled wider than ever, and thumped the stump of his tail hard upon the table.

"He's took to you, you see, sir," said the steward proudly. "He'd go with you anywheres like a lamb. he would. I'd like to think that you and Bill 'ud be together; you'd be company for each other anywheres."

"I should love to have him," said Caspar wistfully, laying his small cheek against the dog's. "I wonder if my grandmother would let me keep him. Pat says she's a very particular old lady. I've never seen her you know."

"Caspar and Bill seated side by side upon the table."

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"Let's call Pat and ask," suggested the steward; and in a few minutes the tall form of the grizzled old soldier blocked the entrance to the cabin.

Caspar and Bill were by this time seated side by side upon the table, and Bill's head leaned confidingly against the child's shoulder. Caspar's arm was about him. Pat listened gravely to the matter under discussion, and then scratched his head reflectively.

"Do you think my grandmother would mind if I brought Bill?" asked Caspar eagerly.

"Sure, yer honour, and I don't see what she could say against the crayture," answered Pat, looking very wise.

"I think she would be sure to love him," said Caspar; "he has such a sweet face."

"Sure, yer honour, and that he has," answered Pat; while Bill rolled his eyes round and gave the child's face a lick by way of expressing gratitude for the appreciation received.

"Perhaps my grandmother is fond of dogs," said Caspar tentatively. "If she lives in a large house, she must have some of her own there."

"Sure it's a mighty foin place her ladyship lives in," answered Pat; "but as for dogs, I disremember seeing any of them there. But that was a long while ago."

"Then you think I might take Bill with me?" asked Caspar.

"Sure, yer honour, I'd take the dog first and ax

her ladyship's leave afterwards," answered Pat, who could not bear to think of bringing a cloud back to the child's face.

"That would be a very good plan, I think," said Caspar thoughtfully; and from that moment he began to look upon Bill as his own private property.

"You must give the steward a very nice present when we go," he said to Pat, who kept their store of money, "because he has been so very kind about Bill. I can't pay him for him, because it might hurt his feelings; but you must give him something extra nice when we go, because he has been so very kind all the time, and especially about Bill."

"Trust that to me, yer honour," answered Pat; and Caspar felt he could now safely leave the matter in Pat's hands.

Up till this time Bill had been kept rather rigorously to the steward's quarters and the fore-part of the vessel; but now it was Caspar's great pleasure to parade the deck with the young dog at his heels. Bill had been very well trained in spite of his tender age, and comported himself with great dignity. Caspar felt as though he had almost reached man's estate as he paced up and down with Bill padding softly in his wake. He noticed with some satisfaction that the ladies rather drew their skirts aside, and did not make so many overtures to him when he had this savage-looking companion beside him. This suited him exceedingly well, and he smiled to himself

as he observed it. It strengthened his conviction that ladies were nice to look at, and very kind, but not much good to anybody. Of course mother had been different; but then nobody was ever like her. And she had gone away, and would not come back any more. The more the child thought about her, the more convinced he was that nobody else on the face of the earth could ever resemble her.

"Hullo, old chap! what have you got there? Have you fished up a merman's dog somewhere out of the sea?"

Caspar looked up and smiled at the speaker. This was one of his chief friends amongst the passengers; indeed, it was almost the only one out of all the number whom he really counted as a friend.

Captain Rutland was on his way home on sick-leave. He had been ill of fever in India, and was ordered home for a considerable time. He had been quite ill at first, and used to lie on a long chair on deck, and Caspar had often sat beside him and talked to him. A friendship had sprung up in this way between the pair, and now the child's face brightened at hearing the familiar voice.

He wanted to show his new possession, and seated himself beside Captain Rutland, patting his knee so as to encourage Bill to put his paws up, which he instantly did.

"He's my dog now," he said, with evident pride. "Isn't he a beauty?"

"He's a fine fellow. But where on earth did he come from?"

"The steward had him. He's 'Queen Bess's son. You've seen 'Queen Bess,' haven't you? She's allowed to come out up here sometimes, but Bill always stayed below. But he needn't now. He's my dog, and the captain says I may take him about with me. The ladies are afraid of him; they think he'll bite them. Ladies are very funny, don't you think?"

"Well, they have their uses in the scheme of creation, as you'll find for yourself one of these days," answered Captain Rutland, who was rather given to say things which Caspar could not in the least understand, but which made him feel rather grown up at having addressed to him. This was one of the things which attracted him to the captain. He did not try to adapt his conversation as if speaking to a baby, as the ladies did. Caspar had been so much with grown-up people that he liked their way of talking better than a simpler fashion. It did not matter whether he always understood it or not—in fact, he preferred it when it was rather above his head; it gave him food for speculation and the play of imagination.

"I don't think they are of much use on board ship," returned the child; "and you know when there are shipwrecks they make a great deal of trouble by screaming and running about and getting in people's way. That's why I don't think I'll have them on my ship; because I want to get wrecked sometimes,

and live on desert islands and that sort of thing. I don't think it would be proper to be a sailor and a ship's captain and never have wrecks and adventures; do you?"

"Well, I don't know whether the owners would look at the matter quite in that light; but there are two sides to every question, as we all know. So you think you would rather have Bill as a passenger on your ship than one of the ladies?"

"Why, yes. Bill would be useful. He would carry things, and on the desert island he would hunt and track savages and do lots of things. I wish I could have a ship now, and go away with Pat and Bill. I wonder if I have enough money to buy one for myself. Pat thinks I shall be rich when I get to England. Do you think I should be rich enough for that?"

Captain Rutland lifted the little boy upon his knee. Caspar did not mind this action from the soldier, though he rather resented it in his silent fashion from any of the ladies.

"I don't know about that, my man. You may be rich in one way; but you won't be able to use your money as you like just yet. That's the worst—or the best—of being young. We have to let other people decide what is best for us; and our business isn't to think what we should like to do ourselves, but just to obey orders. That's what you'll have to do for some years yet. That's what I have to do in my service—and a good job too."

Caspar raised his big, dark eyes, and studied the face of his friend intently.

"What is your service?"

"The Queen's service," answered the young soldier. "I serve her in the army."

"Does she come and tell you what to do?"

"Not exactly; but she sends her commands through the right channel, and I get mine from my superior officer. I obey him, and then I know I'm obeying her."

"Do you ever have to do what you don't like?"

"Very often indeed."

"Doesn't it make you angry?"

"Well, sometimes I feel a bit riled; I'll not deny it. But if that happens, I just try to think of all the splendid fellows who have gone to their death without a word for the sake of their country and their Queen. And then, you know, one feels it's mean and foolish to grumble. What's the good of serving under the very best Queen who ever lived, if one is to make a pother over every little bit of discomfort one is called upon to bear? We should never be men at all if everything always went just smooth for us all our lives."

Caspar looked out over the wide horizon with grave, thoughtful eyes.

"Do you love the Queen very much?"

"I'd die for her any day, and be proud to do it," answered the young man, with quiet enthusiasm.

"Now mind you, small Sir Caspar, you grow up to be a true and loyal servant of the Queen's. Never mind how you serve her—on sea or on land. Only take care that you give her your loyal love and reverence; and if you try always to do that, you'll find your life all the better and happier for it wherever you are."

"How?" asked Caspar, still gazing abroad.

"Why, you'll feel that everything you learn, every bit of hard work you have to do, every trouble and trial which makes the discipline of life, is making you a better and a nobler man, and is fitting you to be a better subject of the Queen's. We've got the best sovereign reigning over us that the world has ever seen; it's for us to try to make ourselves the very finest set of subjects that a sovereign can have. You may be a great man one of these days, Caspar, as your father was before you. Don't you be discouraged if things are rather hard at first in a new country and a new home. Remember you are closer to the Queen than you were when you were out in India. Think about her, and how you will one day, perhaps, have the honour of seeing and speaking to her, as I expect your father had."

"Yes, once," answered the child. "He told me about it. And mother had a beautiful dress and feathers, and went and kissed her hand. I've got the pictures of them both—only they are rather faded. I should like to see the Queen myself; but she would not notice me."

"That doesn't matter a bit. Only try to make yourself worthy of her notice; that will do for the present."

The child was silent for a long time, and then said slowly,—

"I'm going to live with my grandmother. I wonder if she will be like the Queen?"

"You must try to feel that she is your queen at home," said Captain Rutland.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you must feel towards her as I do to my commanding officer. I get the Queen's orders through him, you know; you will get your orders from your grandmother. She will be trying to teach you to grow up like your father—you know she helped to train him when he was a little boy, just as she will train you now. Perhaps some of the things she will tell you will be rather hard to do. She may make rules you will not like to obey at first. That is how it is with us: we have a number of rules that seem no good and are very tiresome. But as we go on we see that they are made to fit us to be good soldiers and do the Queen's pleasure; and so your grandmother's rules will help to make you a fine fellow like your father, fit for the Queen's service. That's how you will have to think about matters when you get to your new home. You think about growing up in the way to make a man worthy to serve her; then you will not mind if things are a little hard at first"

Caspar was taken by the idea, which was not altogether new to him, as he had heard the Queen spoken of by his parents ever since he could remember anything.

"I'll try," he said; "and I'll tell Pat about it. Pat served the Queen when he was a soldier."

Just then there was an eager cry from somebody on the fore-part of the steamer. Captain Rutland rose and put Caspar off his knee, exclaiming in quick, eager tones,—

"Come and have a look! They have sighted the old country at last!"

Everybody was exclaiming and questioning. Some of the passengers had tears in their eyes. Flushed and excited faces were to be seen on every hand.

Caspar looked up at the soldier, and saw a new, glad light in his eyes. He himself felt no especial interest. India was dearer to him still than the "home" he had never seen.

He took his friend's hand and laid his cheek against it.

"Will you come and see me some day in my new home?" he asked wistfully.

Captain Rutland put his hand down upon the boy's head and answered,—

"I will if I can, my little man."

CHAPTER II.

SIR CASPAR'S NEW HOME.

THE little baronet, coming for the first time in his short life to the home which was actually his own, and which he would one day rule over with independent sway, sat in the big open carriage drawn by the two finest horses he had ever seen in his life, and held very fast to Pat's hand, as though that friendly touch were the only link connecting the old life with the new.

Pat, for his part, felt altogether like a fish out of water sitting in this fine carriage by the side of his little master. He had tried hard to induce Caspar to let him follow with the luggage, saying that her ladyship would not like it for him to arrive in the carriage behind the liveried servants. But the child had clung so tenaciously to him, and had begged him so earnestly not to desert him, that the soft-hearted soldier had been forced to give way. Moreover, the fine powdered footman had whispered confidentially in his ear that he had better get in, since the little master wished it; her ladyship would not take any

notice of a breach of decorum to-day, and Pat's name was known in the household as that of one who had served the late master faithfully and well up to the very moment of his death.

Caspar sat very straight up in the carriage, gazing about him with eyes full of wonder.

He had never seen anything so pretty, he thought, as the little villages lying in the valleys, with the wood-crowned hills behind them. He was delighted by the rustic bridges over which they frequently had to pass, and thought the tender tints of the trees, just beginning to burst into leaf, more beautiful than anything he had ever seen in India.

The soft, misty sunshine looked so strange to him after the golden glare of India. It seemed to make the whole world like a sort of fairyland, full of mysterious possibilities. The child's dark eyes dilated as he watched the changing landscape, and he wondered what mysteries lay within the shadowy valleys he saw here and there, and to what magic places the various roads and field-paths led. He pictured himself mounted upon some swift-footed steed, or in some fairy chariot, wending his way to the enchanted regions of which he caught glimpses here and there. Sometimes a gleam of water caught his eye, sometimes it was the sparkle of a stone quarry, or the white, misty grandeur of a miniature cascade. But whatever it was, there seemed to be beauty everywhere; and in spite of the strangeness of everything,

the child's heart swelled within him for gladness: for little Sir Caspar had an unconscious craving after what was beautiful, and the dusty plains of India had given little food for his eager imaginings.

"You never told me half how beautiful it all was, Pat," he said at length.

"Sure, yer honour, and I'd forgotten it meself," answered the old servant. "I remember the house; 'tis a foin place entirely. But I wasn't long there. The master got his orders for India, and it was little I saw of the place after that, for I was busy from morning till night getting his things together."

Caspar was silent after that. A wave of memory swept over him, and his dark eyes swam in tears. He had never forgotten his father and mother. He thought of them daily, and had often cried himself softly to sleep in his little berth. But at other times the merciful oblivion of childhood helped him to enjoy the things of the present, and he did not always carry about with him that ache of the heart which was so very hard to bear when it did come.

Pat's words suddenly brought it back at this moment. How often and often his father or his mother had talked to him of this home-coming—had told him of the big, beautiful house "at home," where grandmother would be waiting for them! How many times had they sat under the veranda after the sun had set, picturing the welcome that was awaiting them on the other side of the sea!

How mother's face had always lighted up and father's voice taken a different ring as he spoke of his boyhood's home! Caspar used to listen, and wonder and long for the time when he should see it for himself. But he had never been able to picture it, for he had never seen anything but Indian houses and villages all his life, and even the photographs shown him sometimes conveyed little impression to his mind.

Now he was seeing it all for himself; but there was only Pat to share the welcome with him. It was no wonder that a wave of sorrow and hungry longing swept over his heart, and that he felt his loneliness more acutely than he had done all the weeks he had spent upon ship-board.

The tears in his eyes so dazzled his sight that it needed Pat's hint to arouse him to a sense of what was passing.

"Begorrah, thin, if this isn't the village itself! Sure and it's the whole place as has turned out to welcome yer honour. Take off your hat, sor, and make them a bow as ye go by. Don't you hear the boys all shouting and cheering?"

Caspar dashed the drops from his eyes and looked out with wonder and curiosity. The carriage was rolling along a wide road, and on either side were pretty timbered cottages, prettier than any he had seen before. But besides this, the roads were lined with village people. Men in their working clothes

seemed to have left their toil to watch the carriage go by. Women with babies in their arms, and with little children clinging to their skirts, stood at their cottage doors or at the garden gates. Big lads had swarmed up the trees to have a good look as the carriage went by, and the men and boys all raised their voices in a gruff cheer of welcome as they saw the child in the carriage.

Caspar's pale face grew rosy red. He had not been prepared for this demonstration of welcome. He took off his hat and made a little bow to right and left, as he had seen his mother do sometimes when their carriage had been greeted on all hands at some semi-state function.

The men cheered again. Some little girl threw a posy of wild flowers into the carriage. Caspar caught it, and waved his acknowledgment; and then the carriage left the village behind, and Caspar turned eagerly to Pat and said,—

"Pat, are those yellow flowers primroses? Mother used to say how she wished she could see primroses again."

They had reached a pair of great iron gates, standing between stone pillars upon each of which was perched a great falcon of stone. A lodge stood just within the gates, and a woman was standing there who made a deep courtesy as the carriage swept past.

Almost at once the road deflected to the left, and

ran through a great beech wood carpeted with primroses; and when that was passed, Caspar saw a wide stream before him, spanned by a picturesque old stone bridge.

"O Pat! look, look! What a beautiful place it is!"

"True for you, yer honour; it's a mighty foin place. That's the Falconer's Bridge, as 'tis called; and away beyond somewhere in the woods is the Falconer's Pool. And when we turn the next corner, you'll see the house itself. Long live yer honour to rule over it all!"

Caspar did not feel as though there would be much ruling for him. He was rather overpowered by the magnitude and beauty of all he saw. Things in India had all been on a large scale—he had been used to a certain amount of state all his life; but it seemed very different in England, where all the servants were white, and where the aspect of everything was changed. If only he could have clasped his mother's hand, and kept his eyes upon his father's face, it would all have been easy! But now he had to support his dignity alone, and face the unknown grandmother without anybody to support him.

And all this while Bill had been sitting upon the opposite seat, staring about him with round, wondering eyes, half disposed to make flying leaps from the carriage, but restrained by the gestures of his master, and by the detaining hand of Pat, who held the chain attached to his collar.

Bill made no secret of his astonishment at all he saw. He snorted continually, turning his head from side to side, and waddling gingerly from one edge of the carriage to the other, as he became interested first in one view and then in another.

Bill had had a bath just before being landed, and his coat was spotlessly clean and white. Caspar thought him lovely; but there might be a difference of opinion on that point. He had a great many of the bull-dog's typical traits—an upturned nose, a wide mouth, a row of shining teeth which were generally more or less exposed to view, and an air of ferocity which was belied by the real good-nature of the eyes, although latent there lay a strain of dogged tenacity and fierceness which would be certain to show itself upon provocation. Bill was the kind of dog who would make a firm friend or an implacable foe, as the case might be; and it would be generally felt by those who understood dogs and their ways that it was more agreeable to rank as friend than as foe to "William Shakespeare."

"Look, yer honour!" cried Pat suddenly; "there is yer honour's own home!"

Caspar looked, and saw a long pile of building, upon the windows of which the setting sun was shining brilliantly. He caught glimpses of picturesque battlements, turrets, and gables. He received an impression of something at once beautiful and stately. Then the road turned again, passed through another

gate, and almost before he was aware of it, he was driven into a sort of courtyard, and the carriage drew up under a portico at the foot of a flight of smooth, polished steps.

In a moment the door of the carriage was thrown open. Caspar saw a long array of servants drawn up upon the steps and in the hall. Instinctively he took off his hat, and then at a sign from Pat he slowly descended from the carriage to pass up between the lines of waiting servants.

"Aren't you coming too, Pat?" he asked wistfully.

"No, yer honour; you must go in alone," answered the servant, with some urgency in his voice.

Caspar realized that the time had come when he must stand on his own feet and accept the undesired dignities of his position.

"Very well," he answered, with a little sigh; "but I shall take Bill with me," and he held out his hand for the chain.

Pat relinquished his charge at once, and the child, leading his four-footed companion, passed up the steps and into the great dim hall, which looked to him almost like a church, with its stained-glass windows and heavy oak carving.

Involuntarily he lowered his voice.

"Where is my grandmother?" he asked.

"Her ladyship is waiting for you in the south drawing-room, sir," answered the soft-footed, quiet-voiced man in black who had opened the carriage door.

All the servants wore black coats, but some of them had white stockings and black buttons, and white powder on their heads; but this one wore clothes "like a gentleman," as Caspar expressed it to himself. He seemed to be the most important person in the house, and he paused in the middle of the hall and asked respectfully,—

"Shall I send your dog to the stables, sir?"

"No, thank you," answered Caspar, quietly but decidedly; "I will take him with me."

The man hesitated a moment, and then said in the same tone,—

"Her ladyship does not generally allow dogs in the house, sir."

Caspar felt his fingers tightening upon Bill's chain. If the butler had been a dark-skinned servant, he would have answered him rather haughtily; but he felt rather as though arguing with some one of his own standing. But for all that he was not going to give way. What was the good of being a baronet if you might not have as much liberty as a ship's steward?

"I will speak to her ladyship about it," he said, his heart beating rather fast at his own temerity.

"Very good, sir," answered the man, in the same respectful way, and he went on along a softly-carpeted corridor, Caspar following with bated breath.

He heard Bill snorting behind him. Bill always did snort if at all excited or disturbed in mind. He

padded on very quietly behind, and did not make lunges to right or left, or pull against his chain. Caspar felt his hot breath sometimes against his calves, and was strengthened by the silent support of his follower.

A door was thrown open for him, he heard the servant speak his name in rather significant accents, "Sir Caspar Adair, my lady," and then Caspar found himself inside an unfamiliar room, face to face with an old lady in very deep mourning, who was sitting in her chair beside the fire, and gazing across the room at him with an expression in her eyes that went straight to Caspar's heart.

He had never pictured very clearly what his grandmother was like, though he had seen photographs of her often. He knew that she wore white caps, and mittens on her hands; that she was tall and stately, and had been very beautiful once. But he had somehow never thought of her being beautiful now—and yet she was. Her eyes were just like father's; and he had the most beautiful eyes in the world, except perhaps mother's, as Caspar had always believed. And her face was like father's too: it had the look which his had worn during the last weeks of his life, after mother had left them, and everybody had said that he was growing old.

That was what struck the child as he stood just within the room, his eyes upon his grandmother's face. She was so like father, even to that sad and

hungry look which his face had worn after mother had been taken away.

Caspar had tried beforehand to think what he should say to his grandmother when first they met. He had made up a good many speeches in his head; but now that the moment had come, he found he had forgotten them all. Indeed he forgot to note that he had forgotten. He even forgot to be afraid, or to wonder what her ladyship would say to Bill. He dropped the end of the chain, and went forward with both his hands stretched out.

"Grandmother!" he said, with quivering lips; and the next minute he was folded in her arms, and found himself clinging to her in a fashion he had never for a moment thought of in his wildest imaginings.

No word was spoken between them; but Caspar felt as though he should never again be afraid of his grandmother, even though she might look very stately and speak with dignity and even severity. She loved him. He felt that through every fibre of his being; and once assured of that, he was satisfied.

Presently she put him gently from her, still keeping her hands upon his shoulders, and her eyes fastened themselves upon his face with an intent and hungry look. Then they turned and fixed themselves upon a picture which hung above the fireplace; and Caspar, following the direction of the glance, met

the gaze of a pair of pictured eyes strangely like his own.

The picture represented a little boy dressed in a Highland suit, his hand upon the neck of a small, rough pony. The child could see the likeness to himself in the boy of the picture, and he asked softly,—

"Was that father?"

"Yes, my dear; that was your father when he was about your age. I am glad you are so like him, Caspar."

"That's what mother used to say," answered the little boy. "But father thought I was like mother too. My hair was like mother's, he used to say."

"Yes, you are fairer than your father was as a child; but you have his dark eyes. Little Caspar, will you try to be happy here, with only your old grandmother to take care of you?"

He nestled up to her side confidingly. There was something in the tones of her voice, in the expression of her face, in the very quietness and self-restraint of her manner, which forcibly recalled his father, and made him feel restfully content in her presence. The ladies on ship-board had been very kind—had caressed and petted him—but he had never felt at home with them as he did with his grandmother even during this first interview. The mysterious bond of kinship, which he was far too young to understand or analyze, asserted itself at once and irresistibly. He loved, and therefore he was not afraid.

All this time Bill had behaved with great discretion, and had amused himself by padding softly round the unfamiliar room, making his own observations upon all that he saw. Now he returned to the side of his little master, and suddenly reared himself up against him, putting his paws upon the arm of the chair in which Lady Adair was sitting, and giving vent to a few snorts of inquiry and sympathetic interest.

Caspar felt that his grandmother recoiled a little from the savage-looking dog; for his best friends could not deny that Bill had a singularly savage aspect, in spite of his natural sweet temper.

"Caspar, how came that creature here?" she asked.

"He's my dog," answered the child, putting his hand caressingly on Bill's head. "He's such a dear old fellow I am sure you will love him, grandmother."

"Brander should have sent him to the stables," said Lady Adair, with her hand on the bell. "He had no business to let him into the house."

Caspar's heart sank a little at the tone in which these words were uttered, for there was a finality about them from which he feared there was no appeal.

"Please, grandmother, the man who brought me did want to send him to the stables; but I said I would take him with me."

"I never allow dogs indoors," said Lady Adair quietly.

Now this was a prohibition which had never seriously occurred to Caspar. He had always been accustomed to have pets about him. In the free life of the big bungalow, with its endless retinue of servants, the child had reigned like a little prince; and as he was an only child, and of a naturally sweet and tractable temper, he had been suffered to have a good deal of his own way. Therefore he was greatly taken aback to hear these decisive words, and a wave of rebellion urged up in his heart. He was almost bursting into vehement speech, when a sudden thought flashed into his mind and held him mute.

It was the words Captain Rutland had spoken to him which now recurred to his memory. Soldiers had to obey the Queen through their commanding officers, and he had to obey by keeping his grandmother's rules. Obeying when you did not want to obey was the way to become a good soldier or a good man. If he obeyed his grandmother when he was little, it would help to make him a good servant of the Queen's when he grew big. That was what Captain Rutland had said; and he must be right, because father was a great and good man, and mother told him what an obedient son he had been.

A little quiver ran through the child's frame. The tears started to his eyes. It was not quite easy to control his voice; but Caspar made a great effort, and answered submissively,—

"Then please may he have a nice stable to live

in? and may I go and see him, and take him out every day?"

Lady Adair's hand was on the bell, but she had not yet rung it. Something in the child's aspect and manner seemed to make her pause. She looked into the little face, which had grown pale under the stress of feeling. She saw the tears standing in the wistful dark eyes, and she asked in a different voice,—

"Did you expect to keep a dog in the house with you?"

"We always had them in India," he answered. "And Bill is so gentle, and takes such care of me. I have nobody to play with but him and Pat. The steward gave him to me on board ship. I thought in such a big house as this there would be room for him as well as for me. But not if you don't wish it, grandmother."

The last words were bravely spoken, although the child's fingers unconsciously closed tighter upon Bill's collar and the creature snorted louder than before.

Lady Adair looked at the child and then at the dog, and debated with herself a few moments. It was not easy for her to break through any long-established rule of the house; and yet there had been a time when a small boy had raced about the long corridors with a dog or two at his heels. There was something in this little fellow's very submissiveness that disarmed her far more than any pleading or arguing would have done.

"It is a pity the steward gave you such an ugly dog," she remarked, looking with distaste at Bill's blunt face and upturned nose.

"I know what you mean," answered Caspar eagerly. "I thought he was ugly when I saw him first; but he has such a beautiful expression that you very soon forget about his features, and soon they seem quite lovely too," and he laid his cheek against Bill's with a caressing gesture.

"Don't let him lick you, my dear," said Lady Adair, with a slight shudder, as she saw the great red tongue come out in ready response to the overture; and then after a little pause she added, "Would it make you much happier to have the dog with you in the nurseries? I could not allow him in the other parts of the house; but if you and Patrick will keep him there, and see that he does not intrude where he is not wanted, I have no particular objection to his being with you there."

Caspar's response was to put his arms round his grandmother's neck again and press a kiss upon her cheek.

"O grandmother dear, if you did not mind, Bill and I would like it so much—and Pat too. It won't be nearly so lonely for me if I may have dear Bill with me when I'm not with you."

Lady Adair looked into the child's eyes and parted the hair upon his brow.

"Are you lonely, little Caspar?" she asked, and

at the sound of these words the tears came into the child's eyes.

"I usedn't to be," he answered softly. "I always had mother or father. But it has been very lonely since—"

His lip quivered; he could not complete the sentence. Lady Adair bent her stately head and kissed him on the brow.

"I have been lonely too, little Caspar—lonely for a great many years. I thought my lonely days were to come to an end soon; but God has ruled it differently from what we planned. You and I will have to take care of each other now."

"O grandmother!" cried Caspar eagerly, "I should like to take care of you, if I might. And Bill will take care of you too!"

Bill snorted loudly and drew back his lips in an eager grimace of implied devotion, feeling something in the air which aroused his sympathetic interest.

"He understands everything we say, he is so good and clever," said Caspar admiringly. "You will soon get to love Bill, grandmother, if you see him sometimes."

Lady Adair by this time had rung the bell, and the servant was already at the door.

"Take Sir Caspar upstairs to Mrs. Diggles," she said to the butler, "and tell Patrick Malony that I wish to see him soon."

CHAPTER III.

A LITTLE QUARTET.

"OH dear," sighed little Jetty, "I am so tired!"

"Tired of what, darling?" asked Betty, with her little motherly air, as she bent over the old-fashioned nursery sofa.

"Tired of lying down and my back always aching," answered Jetty, with a patient little sigh of weariness. "If I could play about, the days would not be half so long."

"I'm tired of the days being all alike!" cried Hetty, getting up from the brick castle she and another little sister were building in a corner of the old-fashioned wainscoted room. "If we might only go out and live in the woods and hunt wild men, or do anything different, I shouldn't mind. But every day's just the same—lessons, lessons, lessons, and just going a stupid walk, and then playing up here. I want something different to happen."

A crash from the corner announced the wreck of the castle. The remaining child scrambled up from the ruins and joined the group round Jetty's couch.

"I want something to happen too!" cried Letty, with a stamp of her small foot. "In books things always happen to children, and Miss Grimshawe says books are true. I don't believe they are. If they were, why don't things happen to us? We've never had an adventure all our lives! I believe adventures are just made up, and I believe history is just made up. I believe everything's just made up!" and Letty tossed her head till her neatly-brushed hair all stood out on end, as it did on very small provocation; for it was possessed of a rebellious curliness which set neatness at defiance, and was the despair of nurse and governess.

"If it weren't for Jetty," remarked Hetty, with equal decision though with a rather less expenditure of outward energy, "we'd all run away; and perhaps we'd dress up as boys and be stowaways, and go to sea, and have all sorts of adventures. Or we might be gipsies, and live in a cave, and tell people's fortunes. But we couldn't go without Jetty, and she wouldn't be able to run fast enough. They'd be sure to catch us."

Betty shook her head with a little air of motherly reproof. She was not very old herself, not much more than ten; but she felt her position as the eldest of the party, and generally tried to curb their imaginings when they threatened to go beyond all reasonable limits.

"That wouldn't do at all," she said. "We might

get eaten by wolves or stolen by real gipsies. That would be worse than staying at home and having lessons with Miss Grimshawe."

Hetty and Letty exchanged glances; they were not at all sure about this. They had sometimes seen a gipsy caravan upon the roads, and had lingered for a few moments near to it (till swept onwards by the relentless Miss Grimshawe) in a sort of tremulous hope that some smiling woman or strange, bearded man might come out and steal them and let them share the strange, free life of the road. But not once had any of the gipsy people seemed in the least desirous of kidnapping the children, and hence Letty's wholesale scepticism of the whole row of juvenile stories which adorned their shelves.

"The bishop's little daughter was only left alone just for a few minutes all her life," she once remarked to Hetty, with a note of scorn in her voice, "and she was stolen directly, and had ever so many nice, interesting things happen to her. We've often been alone quite a little while when Miss Grimshawe has been in the post-office or in the washerwoman's cottage. But nobody ever will steal us. I think it's mean of people to write books like that; or else it's very mean of the gipsies only to steal the children who don't want to be stolen, and whose fathers mind very much. I don't believe our papa would care a bit if we were all stolen—every one of us!"

But this was not said in Betty's hearing, for

Betty always hushed down any remarks of this kind. Nevertheless, the pair of twins, who shared every thought and feeling, and were only just distinguishable one from the other, had their own views upon the subject of life in general and their own in particular, and were by no means always restrained from expressing their views by the elder-sisterly reproofs of Betty.

Jetty came next in age to Betty, and was something of an invalid. She had a weak back, and had to lie down a great deal; and Betty acted little mother to her, and loved her tenderly. Indeed, the twins always strove to be gentle and kind to Jetty, for they pitied her very much. The children were all much attached to one another, and though differences of opinion existed, quarrels in the nursery were rare, for they had learned to bear and forbear with one another.

"Well, if we can't run away I don't see what we can do," Hetty said, with a long-drawn sigh. "Miss Grimshawe will never let us do anything amusing; and nothing ever happens. I don't believe anything *can* happen in this house. I think it's been bewitched, so that every day has to be exactly like the last. Perhaps Miss Grimshawe is a sort of ogre, and makes it so."

There was silence for a moment, and then Letty looked up like one who has an inspiration.

"Suppose we poison Miss Grimshawe!" she sug-

gested, in a low voice not destitute of awe. "Perhaps that would break the spell."

Hetty looked with wondering eyes at her sister—eyes that expressed a considerable amount of admiration at the boldness of the idea; but Betty frowned, and shook her head very decidedly.

"That is a naughty thing to say, Letty," she remarked, with a warning finger upraised in reproof.

"Well, we needn't poison her dead, you know," answered Letty, as though making a concession to prejudice, "but enough to make her very ill, so that she wouldn't be able to give us any lessons for a lot of days, and would have to let us play in the garden instead of taking stupid walks. That would make things different just for a little while. I want things to be different. I want something to happen—we all want something to happen! I don't see why we shouldn't poison Miss Grimshawe!"

She repeated the phrase with greater boldness than she had ventured upon at first, and looked Betty valiantly in the face, as much as to show that she was not going to be daunted by the disapproval recently expressed.

Betty said nothing. She knew that Letty in this mood was better let alone; contradiction only encouraged her to wilder flights of imagination. But Hetty eyed her twin with eager eyes, and asked almost in a whisper,—

"Where could we get any poison?"

"Toadstools," answered Letty promptly. "Lots of them grow out of tree-trunks and in all sorts of places. Some of them are very pretty. I should like to eat them myself, but Miss Grimshawe says they're poison. I'd like to give her some herself!"

"I don't think that would be very nice of us," said Jetty. "And I think Miss Grimshawe tries to be kind. I think she is rather fond of us."

"I'm sure she isn't," answered Letty quickly; "she only likes to scold and fuss all day."

"Should we be put in prison for it?" asked Hetty, who was seriously debating the recent suggestion.

"I shouldn't care if we were!" cried Letty, whose blood was up now, and who was not to be daunted by any idle fears of consequences. "I think it might be much more fun in prison than here. I should like to feel what it was like to have chains on; and if we were put into a dear little dungeon together, we could play all day; and there would be rats, and we would make them tame and feed them with crumbs. We shouldn't have any lessons to do, and when we were brought before the judge, we'd tell him how we were shut up at home, and not allowed to do anything nice; and then he'd send a band of soldiers to set you and Jetty free, and we'd all live together in a wood and be outlaws and have lots and lots of adventures and fun. And if we were hanged some day, I don't see that it would matter much. We could be ghosts after that, and rattle chains, and

groan and frighten the people who went by. I'd rather be a ghost with a chain than always live here with Miss Grimshawe!"

Letty peeped through her long eyelashes at Betty as she delivered this daring speech. Hetty was regarding her with open admiration and sympathy. But, after all, Betty was the person whose opinion in the nursery counted for most; and however defiant Letty might be in word, she did not desire to bring down Betty's real displeasure upon her devoted head.

Betty, however, only shook her head with an air of gentle reproof. She felt a considerable amount of sympathy with her sisters in their desire for some break in the monotony of their life. She often felt the same strong desire for something to happen, although she was less outspoken; for she knew that if she began to complain, matters would only seem worse to the others. It was tiresome to live in a house where every day was the same, and where nothing ever happened to break the routine of life. It was not very wonderful that Hetty and Letty should sometimes break out into eager longings after something else; and, after all, Letty's bold and vivid pictures amused the twins and did nobody any harm.

"You talk a great deal of nonsense, Letty dear," she remarked mildly, with the air of motherly wisdom which came naturally to her. "But you can play games with Hetty about being prisoners and ghosts; only you mustn't really be naughty, and say unkind

things about Miss Grimshawe, because if she were to go away, we might have a real unkind governess, who would beat and starve us, like Miss Stonebox in 'Lilian's Golden Hours.'"

"But if a monkey came in at the window and brought us cakes and sweets like it happened to Isabel," cried Letty, "I shouldn't care a bit. And lots of interesting things happened to Isabel, even though she did have a cruel governess. She had an unkind father too, and that helped it to be interesting. But though we have an unkind father, that doesn't make things happen to us. I don't think things are arranged at all fairly!"

Betty tried to hush these last words; and yet, all the same, she felt deep down in her heart that there was some truth in Letty's words. Their father was not unkind to them in any active way; but he left them quite alone in this house, with their governess and nurse to look after them. He himself hardly ever came to see them; and when he did stay for a short time in the house, it was only quite occasionally that they were admitted to his presence.

Their mother was but a name to the four little sisters. She had died when the twins were born—when Betty was between three and four years old. Betty had a very faint, dim recollection of somebody with a soft voice and gentle hand who had petted her and sung to her when she was a tiny mite herself. She always declared that she "remembered

mother," and that dim, floating memory was treasured by her as a priceless possession. But it was very dim and misty nevertheless, and would probably have faded altogether but for the constant effort made to recall and cherish it. The others could not make any pretence of remembering anything of the mother whose portrait hung in their nursery, and whose face smiled down upon them at their play.

"If mother had not gone away to God," Betty would often say, "everything would be different."

Betty understood more of the family history than any of the rest, and she knew that their father had been a much-disappointed man, and that this disappointment had had something to do with his neglect of his children.

"If one of us had been a boy," she once explained to the rest, "then everything would have been different. Great-uncle Tyrrel would have left all his money and land to us then. But now he has left it to little Cousin Charley; and that makes father very angry, because he is older than Charley's father, and he thinks one of us ought to have had it."

"Can't I dress up like a boy?" Letty had instantly suggested. "I should like to be a boy. I don't see why I shouldn't change into one if it makes so much difference to people."

Mr. Tyrrel's disappointment over the alienation of the family property to a younger branch of the family had been very acute. His uncle, the head of the

family, had never married; and it was not unnatural that the nephew had hoped to succeed to the property, as the only son of the next brother. But Mr. Tyrrel was a man of strong family feeling, which took the form of a resolute determination to keep the property (which was not entailed) in the male line. He had never much liked his second brother or his son, and he had been much fonder of the third and youngest. So when Walter Tyrrel's wife died, leaving him only four daughters, the old man immediately made a will in favour of Charles and his son; and no representations on the part of Walter Tyrrel's lawyer as to the possibility of his client's marrying again and having a son sufficed to alter the old man's resolve. The property was left to the brother who had sons to carry on the old name, or rather it was left to him in trust for his eldest son; and as the old man died within a few years of executing the will, the property was now hopelessly alienated from the father of these four little sisters.

This was perhaps the reason why Mr. Tyrrel took so little notice of his four little daughters, and why the sight of them seemed to give him more vexation than pleasure. He never seemed able to forget how different things might have been had one of them been a boy. Their sex was a source of continual vexation to him, and he lived almost entirely in his chambers in London, or visited the houses of the friends who asked him, seldom coming to his own

house, and leaving his children entirely to the care of that excellent disciplinarian Miss Grimshawe, who also managed the house and regulated the scale of expenditure.

Children accept the conditions of life in a very unquestioning fashion. The little sisters could not remember anything different, and it had not occurred to them until quite recently even to ask questions as to why their father came so little to see them. They did not enjoy his visits. He was cold and distant and critical. It was a relief when he had gone away, and they never looked forward with any pleasure to his return.

But lately, as they began to develop, to ask questions, to compare their own lives with those of the children they read about in the story-book selected for them by Miss Grimshawe, they could not help feeling that there was something different about their lives from what most children experienced in their homes. Betty and Jetty would whisper together longingly of the days when mother was there to take care of them. They would read with wistful eyes the accounts of homes where father and mother were not empty names, but a warm and loving presence in the house, and they would sigh to each other and long for like experiences, and wonder if their own lives could ever be in any way different.

Betty sometimes talked to nurse, who remembered their mother. and had loved her dearly. She loved

the children too, and was the happiest element in their lonely life. But she was old and rather infirm, and suffered from rheumatic joints, so that she could not go out with them or join in their games; and she was mostly to be found sitting by the fire in a little room of her own, keeping their clothes in beautiful order, and overseeing their toilets two or three times a day.

It was from nurse that Betty had gleaned what she knew of the family history; for Miss Grimshawe never told them anything, and did not encourage questions. Perhaps she was right, as the subject was a difficult one to discuss with children. But Betty felt as though she were "old enough to know things;" and since she had been made to understand the cause of father's disappointment, she had been able to give him a greater share of affection than had been possible before.

There was another point in which Betty and Jetty had come of late to take an interest, and that was the standing quarrel which existed between their father and old Lady Adair, who lived in Falconer's Hall, the grounds of which were partially overlooked by their windows.

The children saw Lady Adair every Sunday. She always drove up to church just five minutes before the service began, and got down from her great yellow carriage, the door of which was held open by a fine powdered footman, the whiteness of whose hair

and stockings was a source of ceaseless admiration to Letty. She would walk up the churchyard path acknowledging the salutations of the people with great dignity; and at the conclusion of the service she would return to her carriage and drive away—everybody waiting till her ladyship had gone before leaving the churchyard themselves.

Betty used to wish ardently that they knew their stately neighbour. She wished so much that Jetty could have driven home in that beautiful carriage. Poor little Jetty, who loved the variety of church-going, and loved the service for its own sake, being a more devotional child than the rest, was often unable to go owing to her inability to walk home after the service. She could manage the walk there and the service, although the sitting up tired her back. But the getting home again afterwards often so completely exhausted her, that Miss Grimshawe was obliged to forbid her to attempt church-going, and that was a sad loss to the little girl.

"But if only Lady Adair would let her have a corner in her carriage," Betty had lamented to nurse, "then everything would be easy. And she has the great big carriage all to herself. *Do* you think I might ask her some day?"

This was before Betty had learned that any quarrel existed between her father and Lady Adair. When she spoke in this way, she saw from nurse's manner that it would be impossible to proffer such a request;

and she eagerly asked to be told why it was that their neighbour never noticed them in any way, and must not be spoken to at any price.

Nurse was not very clear as to how the quarrel had begun. She thought it had been going on a long while now, before the children's father had even succeeded to the little estate he had inherited, which went by the name of Falconer's Lodge.

Once upon a time, she explained to Betty, Falconer's Lodge and Falconer's Hall had all been part of one estate—as, indeed, anybody could see; for the Lodge was quite near to the Hall, and its windows overlooked the gardens of the larger house in a way that was quite unusual.

Many people declared that the Lodge never ought to have been put so near to the Hall; but it had been built in the last century as a dower-house for the mother of the heir, and it had never been contemplated for a moment that it would pass out of the hands of the Adairs.

Money troubles had, however, come upon one of the race, who was a sad spendthrift. Something had to be parted with, and when the young man received an offer for the Lodge at a very high rate of payment, he had closed with it instantly, without reflecting what an annoyance it might be to himself and his successors to have a house which was actually included within the ring fence of the property inhabited by strangers.

But even in the lifetime of the man who had parted with it trouble began, and there had been trouble ever since. All sorts of questions as to right-of-way, right over boundary walls, over hedges and timber trees in the hedges, and the maintaining of a common road began to arise, and there had been small lawsuits going on almost ever since. Again and again had the Adairs tried to induce the Tyrrels to sell them back the property. There had been ill-blood too long between them, and the Tyrrels refused all overtures made to them. The house was certainly a very comfortable and attractive one. The proximity of the park and gardens of Falconer's Hall was a distinct advantage. They had the place, and they meant to keep it; and the traditions of ill-will and enmity had been handed down for three generations.

The present Mr. Tyrrel, the father of the little girls, had inherited the fag-end of a troublesome law-suit, and had lost it, so that he had always felt very bitterly towards Lady Adair, although he did not live at the Lodge enough to enter into the details of the ever-growing causes of friction. He merely gave general orders that his rights were to be insisted upon, and that there was to be no giving way to the demands of his autocratic neighbour. But no active hostilities were being carried on; and it was nurse's opinion that if Mrs. Tyrrel had lived she would have made overtures of peace to Lady Adair, and that the quarrel would have been healed.

Sometimes Betty and Jetty whispered together about this matter, and wondered if they could do anything towards healing the breach. But nurse used to shake her head and say she didn't see what could be done. Of course her ladyship couldn't notice the little girls when their father had been to law with her, and all the Tyrrels had been her enemies. Besides, she was a very proud lady, and it wasn't likely she wished to make any advance. What were the children of a troublesome neighbour to her?

She had made another attempt to purchase the house upon the death of Mrs. Tyrrel, when it was said that the husband did not really care about living there any longer. But from sheer obstinacy the offer had been peremptorily refused, and since then Lady Adair had not made the least overture of any kind to her inimical neighbour.

"It's a sad pity when folks in the same parish disagree. It's a bad example to set before other folks, and it does a lot of harm many ways. But we have to take things as we find them. We can only make the best of a crooked world."

"Can't we help to put it straight?" Letty had once asked, when nurse gave expression to this opinion.

"It isn't much that any one of us can do," nurse had answered; whereupon Letty, after considering the matter for some time, had remarked,—

"But if everybody tried, mightn't something be done?"

"Why, yes, that's the way things mostly are done," had been the reply. "The more that try, the more gets done; but the pity of it is that there are so few who care to try."

"We'll all try!" cried Letty eagerly; and for some time after that it had been a favourite game with her and Hetty to make-believe that they were going to make up the quarrel with Lady Adair, and become honoured guests at Falconer's Hall.

But time passed by, and there seemed no way of carrying out the plan, so it had rather fallen into oblivion; and Letty had become so desperate for some sort of variety in her life, that she had evolved the bold idea of poisoning Miss Grimshawe!

But excitement and variety were nearer at hand than any of the little sisters imagined. Something at last was about to happen!

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST DAYS.

CASPAR left his grandmother's presence with a feeling of having found something comforting and comfortable. She was not a bit like anybody he had ever seen before in his life; but for all that he found himself able to love her, and was sure that she loved him. Just at that moment love was what Caspar was craving after more than anything else. He wanted somebody to love him and to take care of him. The world had seemed a big, lonely place to him since the death of his parents. Now he had come home—he had always been taught to call Falconer's Hall "home." Till to-day the name had no especial meaning for him, but now he began to understand it in its true sense.

His eyes roved eagerly round him as he followed Brander up the softly-carpeted stairs and along a wide corridor adorned by statuary and trophies of all sorts, some of which had come from India, as the child was very certain. Once the butler paused and

pointed to the skin of an immense tiger which lay in their path.

"Your father, Sir Caspar, shot that," he said to the child, "and sent it home to her ladyship. People say it is one of the largest skins in existence."

Caspar's eyes glistened. He remembered his father's "tiger-stories" very well, and especially one about the huge "man-eater" which he had killed many years ago now, before he married mother and gave up some of his more daring expeditions after big game. Caspar stooped and stroked the huge head of the tiger. It seemed a pity that such beautiful creatures had to be destroyed. It would have been so nice to tame them and let them wander about the house and garden like dogs.

But Brander was now holding open a swing-door into another part of the house; and here the deep, piled carpets ceased, and the passage was covered with matting. The walls were not adorned by pictures and curiosities any longer; but the sunlight streamed in through a row of windows, and the whole place looked cheerful and bright.

"This is the nursery wing, Sir Caspar," said the butler; "I hope you will find everything comfortable. That is the nursery, and Mrs. Diggles has got tea waiting for you there."

The next minute the little boy found himself in a big room, lined from top to bottom with panelled wood, in which stood an immense rocking-horse,

freshly painted and dappled; a number of interesting-looking toys, which he had no immediate leisure to examine; and a table with a snowy cloth, upon which an appetizing tea was spread. A great mullioned window let in a flood of sunshine, and a fire of logs roared up the chimney: for though it was bright and warm in the middle of the day, the mornings and evenings were chilly; and Caspar, accustomed to the intense heat of India, was glad enough to see the fire.

A stout, motherly-looking woman came forward with beaming face to greet him.

"The very image of his father, bless his little heart!" she said beneath her breath. But Caspar heard, and his face lighted.

"Did you know my father?" he asked, with eagerness.

"That I did, my dearie. I was under-nurse when he was a little boy as big as you. There were a brother and a sister, too, in the nursery then, but they both died before they grew up. Sir Caspar was always the flower of the flock, and you are his very image!"

This was very interesting to Caspar. He had not at first altogether liked the idea of having a nurse to look after him. He had been used to the bearer in India, and to Pat. His ayah had been dismissed as superfluous more than a year before. But if Mrs. Diggles had been nurse to his father, that made a

great difference. He did not mind being waited on and talked to by her. Whilst he sat at tea he made her tell him stories about his father and the uncle and aunt he had never known. He looked round the big nursery, and wished, for almost the first time in his life, that he had a brother or sister to play with. It would be more amusing than being quite alone, with just Bill and Pat—if Pat were allowed to come up here.

Caspar began to feel that the liberty of the life in the big bungalow would not be accorded to him here. He had a feeling as though this house went by clock-work, and that everybody had to go by clock-work too, and do just what the mistress decided. It was not what he had been used to at all, but just at first he accepted the new conditions as a matter of course.

Mrs. Diggles was very nice about Bill, though she did call him an ugly-looking creature. She gave him a nice supper, and said that if her ladyship allowed him in the nursery wing she would make no trouble of it, so long as he was clean and proper behaved. Bill was so subdued by the strangeness of his surroundings, that he behaved with the greatest discretion and propriety, so that Mrs. Diggles began to pat him at last and call him a "good creature;" which Caspar took in the light of a personal compliment.

The light was fading as he rose from the table,

but he was eager to see what he could of his new home. He ran to the window, which looked upon a piece of shrubbery ground which Caspar at once likened to "jungle;" and beyond was something which made his eyes glisten as he exclaimed,—

"Oh, surely—is that a bit of a ruin?"

"Yes, my dear; that is the bit that is left of the old house that was burnt in the Civil War or the Wars of the Roses—I'm sure I forget which. There used to be quite a large ruin, folks say; but the Lodge was built mostly out of the old material, and there isn't much left now, but I daresay it will make a very nice place for you to play in. Little people like a tumble-down sort of a place for their games."

"Mother told me about the ruin, but she wasn't sure that any of it would be left by now," said Caspar. "I am so glad it is there still. And what is that high wall behind?"

"That's the wall dividing the Lodge from the Hall."

"And what is the Lodge?"

"It's another house, dearie. It once belonged to the Hall, and it did ought to do so now; but it was sold away once—and a sad pity too; and things are always a bit uncomfortable because it's so near. It was always meant to be one property."

"And who lives there now?" asked Caspar, with interest.

"Why, a gentleman has it; but he's hardly ever there."

"Do you mean that the house is empty?"

"Well, not empty exactly, for his little daughters live there with the governess, poor young dears."

Caspar's face brightened with interest.

"Little girls! I never knew any little girls. I've often wanted to; I think I should like playing with little girls. I suppose we can play together often, as we live so near? Please tell me about them and what they are like."

Mrs. Diggles had rather a hard task before her in trying to explain to Caspar that he would not be able to play with these little girls, because their father had been so rude to Lady Adair. The little boy wanted to go to his grandmother then and there, and talk the matter out with her; but Mrs. Diggles advised patience and caution. She was in reality very anxious herself for the little boy to have companions of his own age to play with, but she knew that if Caspar went open-mouthed to Lady Adair with his request, he would receive a prompt and imperative command not to have anything to do with the four little sisters over the wall. Caspar himself realized that it was better not to invite this strict prohibition. Perhaps if he won his way with his grandmother he might succeed in getting things put right in time.

He remembered the lesson about obedience, and

intended to obey all his grandmother's rules, whether he liked them or not; but he did not go so far as to feel bound by unwritten and unspoken rules, and it came into his head that if nothing were said to him about these little girls, he might perhaps make their acquaintance in some delightfully secret fashion, and have quite a little romantic adventure over it.

He did not see his grandmother again that night; but Pat was allowed to come up and examine his new quarters. Pat had had an interview with "her ladyship," and had been much gratified by his reception. It seemed that Caspar's father had written to his mother—almost the last thing he did—commending the faithful old servant to her care; so he was to have comfortable rooms at the Hall, and a pension, and some light work to do as long as his strength lasted. He was also to attend the little boy on his walks and rides; and altogether Pat felt as though the lines had fallen to him in pleasant places.

"Sure and the Queen herself couldn't have behaved more handsome to an old soldier," Pat concluded; "and it's meself that'll be proud to serve her. She's a great lady entirely, and worthy to be the master's mother."

The next day was Sunday. Caspar had slept soundly and well in his curtained bed, so different from the narrow berth on board ship. The spacious-

ness of his quarters pleased him, though it was all very different from anything he had been used to in India. The rooms seemed so low to him, and he could not quite believe that they would not want punkahs when the hot weather came. But Mrs. Diggles called them "heathenish sorts of things" when he tried to explain to her how they worked, and declared they never wanted them in a Christian country.

He had his breakfast in the nursery, but was told that he would drive to church with his grandmother later on. Meantime he and Bill had a run in the garden, which they both enjoyed very much. It was such a beautiful garden, full of sweet-scented flowers and bushes, with all sorts of enticing nooks and corners, and dark old shrubberies where the sunbeams seldom penetrated, and where it was hard not to think that snakes must be lurking, if not tigers and jackals.

There was a little stream trickling through the grounds, and a great dark piece of water that Pat said was called the Falconer's Pool. There were wide, sunny terraces too, and yew trees at intervals along them, clipped into all sorts of grotesque shapes. And there was a fountain in the middle of the bright flower-beds, tossing its white spray into the air; and the thickets seemed full of birds, some of which sang so sweetly that Caspar stopped to listen again and again. It was the kind of morning that makes young

things shout aloud for pure joy in being alive. Caspar had seldom felt like this in India, but he did to-day.

Presently he was called in and brushed up and made smart for church. Then he went through the swing-door and down the front staircase, and found his grandmother sitting in the hall in a high-backed chair, dressed ready for church, and waiting for the carriage to come. She held out her hand to Caspar and kissed him, and asked if he liked his nurseries and had slept well. But she did not caress him as she had done last night, and there was not the glint of tears in her eyes that had touched his heart. She was very kind, and he felt that he loved her, and that she loved him; but he also felt that she was a grandmother to be obeyed, and perhaps a little feared, and that he would not be able to get his own way in this house with the ease he had been accustomed to in the Indian home.

It was very interesting, however, to sit beside grandmother in the carriage and watch how all the people courtesied or touched their hats as they drove through the village. As they passed one gate not at all far from the church, Lady Adair bowed to a gentleman who was coming quickly out, and said to the child,—

"Take off your cap, Caspar; that is Dr. Kingscote, our clergyman."

When they were inside the church, Caspar looked

about him with subdued curiosity, and very soon he encountered the direct gaze of a pair of very dark, bright eyes. These eyes belonged to a little maid who was one of three little girls occupying a sitting at right angles to the Falconer pew. The little girls had a rather severe-looking lady with them, who kept looking at them all the time with sharp, quick glances. They all sat as still as mice, with their eyes fastened to their prayer-books, or upon Dr. Kingscote's face—all except the little dark maiden at the end, whose glance strayed again and again in Caspar's direction; and he felt himself impelled to keep returning these glances, though he was not quite sure that it was polite to do so. He had an idea that staring was not good manners, but the little girl was nice to look at, and she stared; and once, when a swallow flew twittering through the church, her face lighted up, and she gave such a bright, quick smile at him that he smiled back eagerly, and felt that they were quite ready to be friends.

But, alas! these little girls were the children from the Lodge, whom he might not know; and there were no others in the church, except amongst the poor people and farmer folk. Caspar had not been much accustomed to playing with other children, and did not think he minded being alone. But to-day he felt a great desire to make the acquaintance of the owner of those dark, bright eyes. All the little girls had nice faces, he thought, and he liked the quiet, lady-

like way in which they behaved. They were a good deal alike, especially the bright-eyed one and the sister who sat next her, who was exactly the same height. The other sister was taller, and looked very good indeed, and sat as still as a mouse. The smaller pair evidently tried to carry on some little quiet game during the sermon, more with their eyes and fingers than with anything else. But the glances of the governess quelled this attempt, and Caspar's little friend returned to her occupation of staring at him through her long lashes, when she did not venture to do so openly.

Caspar tried to listen to the sermon, and he liked Dr. Kingscote's face and voice; but he could not help thinking a good deal more of the three little girls near to him, and wondering where the other of them was, for he was almost sure Mrs. Diggles had told him there were four.

After the service he drove back in state to the Hall; but he noticed that the little girls watched him get into the carriage after his grandmother, and he was almost sure that "his little girl" just waved her small hand to him as the horses started. In a great hurry he pulled off his cap, and the eyes of the children met. They both smiled then, and Caspar was conscious of making a resolve in his heart that he *would* know those little girls somehow or other.

He found he was to take his dinner with his

grandmother; and he felt very grand and grown-up as he sat opposite to her at the foot of the table, which sparkled with silver and glass.

Brander stood behind his mistress, and there were two tall footmen in the room handing dishes silently and deftly. Caspar felt subdued by the solemnity of the occasion, and fell into a train of thought which resulted in his asking the following sudden question,—

"Grandmother, what time does God have His dinner?"

There was silence for a few seconds, and then Caspar raised his eyes questioningly to the face opposite. But there was no reply.

One of the footmen rather hurriedly left the room, and Lady Adair asked Caspar if he thought the church a pretty one. That changed the current of his thoughts, and he began to tell about the little church he had sometimes gone to in India, and how there had once been a scorpion in the reading-desk, which had seriously disturbed the equanimity of the chaplain.

After dinner he asked to be set a verse to learn, as mother had always liked him to do a little Sunday lesson. His grandmother let him stay with her till he had committed it to memory and repeated it to her, after which he gained permission to go into the garden with Bill, if he would promise to keep the dog from breaking or injuring the flowers.

Fortunately Bill was intelligent and tractable. In the shrubberies he could not be restrained from pursuing the tracks of rabbits and game, but there he did no harm; and in the more formal parts of the garden he willingly submitted to pace beside his little master, having been well drilled in keeping "to heel" by the steward of the vessel.

The garden was a perfect wonderland of delight to Caspar for many days. It took him quite a long while to explore all its recesses. He made friends with many of the gardeners, some of whom remembered his father, and could tell him stories about him. There was one old man, who weeded the paths and did little light jobs of nailing and pruning, who had been a servant at the Hall ever since he had come as garden-boy, sixty years before. He had an endless number of stories to tell of the old house and its owners. His father had been gardener before him here, and had handed down to him quite a number of traditions. Caspar learned about the lady in white who was to be seen in the park between hay and harvest carrying her head under her arm; about the phantom dog who howled before anybody died in the house; and about the coach and four that sometimes dashed up to the door with a great clatter of hoofs and wheels, but was never to be seen when the peal of the bell brought the servants hurrying to the door.

It was rather a disappointment to Caspar that none

of these wonders were to be seen or heard now. But he delighted to make the old man tell him about them; and he began to think it was a great pity he had not lived in historical times, when the house was a castle and was besieged by soldiers, and when ghosts walked at nights, and things were altogether more interesting than they are now.

But about the Lodge and the people who lived there old Jim could never be got to speak a good word. He was exceedingly wroth that the small house had ever been sold away, and he could not endure the name of Tyrrel. One of his best fruit-walls was now rendered valueless because the owners of the Lodge claimed it as their own; and since the lawsuit had been decided in their favour, never another nail had he been allowed to knock in, and the fruit-trees upon their side were slowly dwindling for lack of proper training.

"They're a bad lot, them Tyrrels!" the old man would say, shaking his fist in the direction of the house. "They want turning out neck and crop, and some day I hope they'll get their deserts. Never has any luck come to them since they had the Lodge and wouldn't sell it back to the Adairs. They'll come to a bad end one of these days, and I only hope I may live to see it."

Little by little Caspar came to the conclusion that he had better not talk to any of the household here of the little girls behind those walls. Mrs. Diggles,

indeed, spoke nicely about them, but she did not encourage her young charge to seek to obtain permission to make their acquaintance, and very soon the whole subject came to be regarded by Caspar as shrouded in a certain mystery.

This made it all the more fascinating to him. When quite alone he almost always sought the ruined fragment of the ancient house, which stood against the high wall dividing Hall from Lodge. The ruin was not extensive in itself, but it was a charming resort for a child. There was a bit of the old dining-hall, with one fragment of the groined roof, still standing. There were little, broken staircases, and a turret chamber in fair preservation; and beneath there was quite a large crypt-like cave, which always seemed full of mystery to the child.

The crypt was soon his favourite spot. Bill was always delighted to go down thither, for sometimes there were rats to be hunted, and there was always the hope of dislodging one; and the dimness made the whole place fascinating and romantic in the eyes of the child.

"If only I had somebody to play with, what games we could have!" said Caspar one day to himself, as he was routing about in the dim place. He did not lack imagination; but it was not easy to play these games quite alone. Bill did his best, but he generally had some hunting of his own on hand. To-day, for instance, he was scratching away in the most deter-

mined fashion in an obscure corner, snorting and making a great noise, and sometimes uttering a short, sharp bark indicative of excitement.

Caspar did not notice very much at first what his comrade was after, for he was used to Bill's vagaries in the crypt, and was full of some plan of his own for fortifying the place against an imaginary siege; but Bill's snortings and barkings grew so imperative at last, that he felt curious to know what the dog had found, and he presently rose and made his way into the dark corner, where the creature was routing about in a state of considerable excitement.

It was very dark, but Caspar began feeling about where Bill was digging, and presently he touched something which felt like metal. The next minute he had got a better grasp of it, and found that it was part of a rusty bolt, and that it was fastened to the side of the crypt.

"Why," he exclaimed, in sudden excitement, "if there is a bolt there must be a door! and if there is a door it must lead somewhere. Good Bill! good dog! go dig, and I'll get my candle and come and look."

Caspar had several candle-ends now hidden in a box down here, together with a box of matches, and he quickly lighted one and carried it to this place. Yes, now that Bill had scratched away the earth and rubbish, he could see quite well that there had been a door here once, and the bolts were on this side. It

was very exciting to make this discovery, and visions of secret passages, subterranean cellars, and hidden treasure rose up before his mind's eye. He would keep it a profound secret. He and Bill would get the door open between them, and make the great discovery. He would never rest until he had done this, and then, perhaps, he might be rewarded by finding some wonderful country, or some magic building the very existence of which had never been suspected by anybody before.

It was hard work—harder than he had expected; and it took several days of scraping and scratching, and picking and pulling before success was attained. Caspar was almost afraid he would either have to give it up or to take somebody into his confidence; and he did not want to tell anybody—not even Pat—just yet, for he had a fear lest grown-up people should decree that the door was not to be opened. He had observed in grown-up people a strange lack of enthusiasm, even where the most interesting things were at stake. The ship's captain would not have a wreck of his vessel, though Caspar had suggested it as a nice termination to the voyage; and perhaps Pat would be afraid to open the door, lest some danger should be concealed behind it.

But patience and perseverance generally win the day, and there came a moment when Caspar felt the door begin to yield.

"It's coming, Bill, it's coming!" he cried, in great

excitement, and putting his shoulder against it, he pushed with all his force, when suddenly it flew open with a great creak and groan, and Caspar found himself face to face—not with a snake, or a tiger, or a magician, as he had half expected, but with the little dark-eyed girl whom he had seen on Sunday in church!

CHAPTER V.

AN ADVENTURE.

AND how came it that Letty was at the other side of the door when Caspar succeeded in forcing it open?

Well, that is easily explained.

The day that Jetty had complained of the wearisome pain in her back was the beginning of such an increase of languor and weakness that Deborah the old nurse and Miss Grimshawe the governess both became uneasy and sent for the doctor.

Now, the old doctor who had treated Jetty from her birth had lately grown very infirm, and had taken an active young partner, who went to see most of the patients now. So far, as it happened, he had never been to see Jetty; but after the summons, sent in some haste, he suddenly walked into the schoolroom, where all the children were at their lessons—Jetty trying, on her couch, to commit a piece of poetry to memory; and Miss Grimshawe could only sign to the other three children to sit quite quietly in their places, instead of sweeping them off

into the nursery, as was the usual routine upon the doctor's visit.

Mr. Coburne stood beside the couch on which Jetty lay, and asked her and Miss Grimshawe a few quick questions. The nurse had by this time come in, and was asked a few more. And all the while the young doctor's quick, keen eyes were fixed upon the pale face of the little girl, and once they strayed across the room towards the table, where the rest of the children were sitting mute and wide-eyed; and Letty, looking straight into his face, made up her mind that he was "nice" as well as clever.

They all knew he was clever. Everybody in the place said so. Nurse had once said that she wished he would come and see Jetty, and now he was here.

Presently he spoke, in his quick, decided way.

"This child is suffering from the want of fresh air."

"It tires her so much to walk," said Miss Grimshawe. "She has not been able to get her usual modicum of fresh air for the past ten days."

"She must not walk more than a very little just at present," answered the doctor quickly; "but she should be wrapped up warmly and taken out into a sunny corner of the garden, where she could spend a great part of the day. The weather is very warm and mild, and the summer is coming nearer every day. Of course, on wet and cold days she must stay in; but whenever it is fine enough she should be out of doors from ten till four at least."

Letty's eyes sparkled at the bare notion of such a thing, and a little flush came into Jetty's pale cheeks. She had so longed to be able to lie out in the sunshine and watch the birds and the flowers; but such a thing as that had never entered into Miss Grimshawe's mind. She looked rather aghast now.

"I should be so much afraid of her taking a chill," she said.

"You need not be afraid. You have high walls here. Put her couch in a sheltered place and wrap her well up. Children are not hothouse plants; they want sunshine and fresh air and moderate exercise, and they will flourish all the better for having plenty of it. I will take the responsibility; but that child must live out of doors for the next few months as far as it is possible."

Nurse nodded her head in satisfaction. She had always been on the children's side when they had longed to play in the garden; but Miss Grimshawe belonged to that school of strait-laced people who thought a prim walk along the roads was the right way of taking exercise, and that being out of doors without a definite object was mere waste of time.

"It will be so dull for her," objected the governess.

"Why?" asked Mr. Coburne quickly; "she has her sisters."

"But they will be indoors at their lessons, or out walking on the roads."

"Let them do their lessons in the garden and play

"The doctor's visit."

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there, then; it will do them far more good. All those children want a spell of sunshine and fresh air," and his quick glance flashed across the room towards where the other three sat like little mice, hanging upon his words with covert intensity of delight.

Miss Grimshawe was so taken aback that she found nothing to say, and the young man continued rapidly,—

"Try a new regimen for a little while, for the sake of this child mainly, but it will benefit them all. Let them live out of doors on fine days. Never mind the lessons, or shorten them. Let them play in the garden and amuse their little sister, who cannot join in all the games, but will like to look on at them. I will answer for it that the time will not be lost. Behind these high walls they can come to no harm. They will be perfectly safe, and they will grow wonderfully stronger and better. No, I don't believe in tonics and medicines for children. Fresh air and sunshine are the tonics they want. If you think it better, I or Dr. Dawes will write a line to Mr. Tyrrel. But that is my prescription—less book-work, and every fine day spent out of doors. It is absolutely necessary for this child, and all the rest will be better for the same regimen."

Nurse looked delighted. It was what she had herself often proposed and often longed for for her darlings. But Miss Grimshawe was in the place of

authority, and nurse was too wise a woman to do anything to cause a sense of divided rule.

But when the doctor had gone, saying he should come back in a few days to see how his prescription worked, Deborah looked into the rather perturbed face of the governess and said,—

"Now don't you make a trouble of it, ma'am; we can but give it a trial. Miss Jetty does look as though she wanted a spell of sunshine and fresh breezes to hearten her up, and it will be a rare pleasure to all of them to have the run of the garden for a while; it's what they are always asking for."

Miss Grimshawe and Deborah went aside to discuss matters.

"I think, ma'am, if you'll let me say so," said the latter, in a respectful tone, "that it is time you had a bit of a holiday yourself. It's more than two years since you left the children, and that's a long time for anybody to stay without a bit of a change or a visit to their friends."

Now Miss Grimshawe was a very conscientious person, and she had sacrificed her holidays again and again rather than leave the children, the charge of whom she felt to be a great tie. But she had an aged mother living in the north, and just now she was anxious about her, for the reports of her health had been disquieting of late. Nurse knew this, and had said several times that she would try to manage the children alone if Miss Grimshawe wanted

to go home. But the thing had never been settled. Now Deborah spoke more freely.

"If it is to be less lessons and more open air and freedom in the garden, why, ma'am, it's just the opportunity you want. As the doctor says, the children can't come to any harm in these high walls. They'll be as safe as in their nursery, and as happy as the day is long. I'll see to them that they don't go out on wet days or run risks of chills. I'll look after them as well as I know how. And it'll do you good to get away and have a real good change and holiday. Everybody wants that sometimes, and a better chance couldn't well come."

Miss Grimshawe saw this, and she did want to go home. She wrote that very day to Mr. Tyrrel, and received an immediate assent to her request. Mr. Tyrrel took little enough interest in the affairs of his household, and so long as there was somebody left to look after the children, he cared no whit whether they were in charge of nurse or governess.

Almost immediately the children were electrified by the news that Miss Grimshawe was going away for at least three weeks, and perhaps longer, and that they were to have a holiday from all but a few light lessons that nurse would hear them, and were to be out in the garden from morning to night on all fine days.

They could hardly believe their own ears.

"Yes, it's true, dearies," said nurse, her own face

beaming; "and you must be very good children, so that Miss Grimshawe may go away easy about you. I don't see that you can get into any harm or mischief in the old garden. All you have to do is to promise not to leave the walled-in part behind, or to go out into the sweep, where people might see you, or to get out on to the roads. So long as you keep away behind, you can do whatever you like. It's a famous place for you, and you will all get rosy and brown, as children ought to do."

"And we can play at being gipsies, and have a bower or a cave of our own, and play at stealing children and all sorts of lovely things!" cried Letty, hopping from one foot to the other.

"You can play at whatever you like, dearies, and make as much noise as you like," answered Deborah fondly; "there won't be anybody to be disturbed. You can romp about to your hearts' content."

Miss Grimshawe departed the next day, leaving many charges behind her, and hoping that things would turn out for the best. But she was afraid she would find her pupils a good deal gone back by the time she returned, and she regarded these new regulations as very revolutionary in character.

But the delight of the children was without bounds.

The two days following the doctor's visit had been windy and wet. Even Jetty herself had been forced to own that it would be no use trying to

think it comfortable to lie out of doors. But upon the morning of Miss Grimshawe's departure the sun shone gloriously, the soft air blew from the south and west, the cuckoo shouted his gay call from the shrubberies, and the thermometer registered something that made nurse smile and nod her head as she looked at it, Letty watching her with admiration and awe.

The thermometer was always an object of reverential admiration to Hetty and Letty. People seemed to know such a lot of things by looking at it, and they could never see that it was different one day from another. It always looked just the same. However, to-day it was plainly in a very good temper; and as soon as ever Miss Grimshawe had driven off in the station fly, the little sisters were hurrying hither and thither to find the best place for Jetty's couch, and make their own observations and explorations of their new domain.

Strange as it may appear, the children knew very little of the garden to the house where they had been born and brought up. Just now and again upon very showery days they had been walked up and down some of the wider paths with their governess instead of being taken out upon the roads; but Miss Grimshawe could never be brought to see that playing in the garden was a nice thing. She always would declare that games should be played indoors, where it was dry and clean; and

that when people went out they should take brisk exercise, and not dawdle or romp. She was afraid the children would ruin their pretty complexions and become tanned and freckled if they ran wild in the garden. She also had a horror of sunstroke in hot weather, as a relation of hers had lost his wits through that calamity one very hot summer's day. The children knew the story by heart; but Letty used to say she'd much rather play in the garden and get a sunstroke than never play at all. She thought it would be very funny to have her hair shaved off and an ice-bag on her head. She did not say so to Miss Grimshawe, but confided it to Hetty; and there was one of their dolls who had a shaven crown, because one of their favourite games was to declare she had had a sunstroke, and must be properly treated for it!

But now Miss Grimshawe was gone—really gone! The sun was shining, the thermometer had told something very good-natured to nurse, and they were to go out into the garden and stay there till tea-time if they liked. They had even been promised the delicious treat of dinner out of doors.

Letty felt that life had no more to offer. She tore to and fro with all manner of things from nursery and schoolroom, and very quickly a most delightful nook was contrived beneath the wall for Jetty's couch to stand in. The nook was formed by an angle of the house and its junction with one of

the high garden walls, and a friendly lime tree threw a veil of softening shadow through its tender green leaves, so that the brightness of the sunshine was just a little dimmed.

A couch was brought out from one of the lower rooms; and when all was in readiness, the children escorted Jetty out to her summer parlour, nurse following to see that she was properly wrapped up, and to enjoy the delight of all the children in the new arrangement.

Jetty had hardly room in her heart for one regret—not even that she could not run about and dance in the sunshine like Hetty and Letty. It was such keen delight to be out in the air, and to see the dancing lights and shadows as the sunbeams chased the little fleecy cloud shadows across the grass, and flickered in upon her through the swaying lime boughs. The air was hot and full of sweet scents. The birds were singing and trilling their glad songs of welcome to the joyous spring-tide. Butterflies were venturing forth and flitting hither and thither in joyous dance. Letty raced after them, emulating their quick movements, but with no desire to hurt or destroy any living thing.

"Well, dearies, you will be very happy here," said nurse, as she prepared to leave them. "If I were younger and had never had the rheumatics, I would come and join you myself. But you'll be good children and keep out of mischief, and presently I'll

bring you out some dinner on plates. You'll like it best so, and it'll be less trouble for everybody."

"We'll come and help," cried Letty—"we'll help to carry the things. We shall be playing a lovely game by that time, and the dinner will be part of it. —I know!" she cried, as nurse vanished round the corner of the house. "You shall be Prince Charlie, Jetty, and you shall be wounded and hiding in a cave, and Betty shall be Flora Macdonald taking care of you. And we are your faithful followers, and we go scouting about foraging for things for you; so we shall bring you your dinner by-and-by, and tell you how many men we had to kill before we could get it!"

Hetty and Letty always lived in a small world of romance of their own. It helped to lighten the monotony of their days to be always "pretending" to be somebody else. Out walking, in bed, even at lesson-times, they would be always more or less engaged in playing their parts in some endless, indefinite game.

Sometimes they were slaves being marched across burning plains, chained two and two together, and whispering of possible escape; sometimes they were persecuted Christians attending service at the risk of their lives. In lesson hours they were generally Lady Jane Grey and her companions studying under a severe taskmaster. But themselves they seldom were, Letty declaring it to be too hopelessly dull not

to be personating somebody, and that she was much more diligent at her tasks and respectful to Miss Grimshawe when she was "pretending."

And now what a delightful setting they had for their games! Betty was quite content with the part allotted to her. She was always ready to sit beside Jetty and share her quiet amusements. Miss Grimshawe had actually made Jetty the present of a new story-book before going away, and Betty was to read it to her in the garden. It lay on the couch beside them now, and as both sisters dearly loved a story, they regarded the bright cover with delighted anticipation. But just now they did not even want the new book to amuse them; there was so much to see and to talk about out here in the garden. Jetty quite liked to fancy herself the Jacobite prince in hiding, and Betty made a most devoted Flora. As for the two younger ones, they dashed hither and thither in a state of wild excitement and glorious liberty. They had hairbreadth escapes and dire perils of discovery and death every half-hour.

The old garden lent itself to illusions. It was a charming place for imaginative children. There were no formal beds or trim, neat paths where they could do any mischief. The garden had run wild for many years now. The hedges had grown tall, the shrubberies thick and dark, and the yew arbours, of which there were two at different places, were dim and mysterious with the growth of the trees about them.

There was about an acre and a half of garden ground walled in from the other garden belonging to Falconer's Hall; but so well was one part hidden from the other by shrubs and clumps and hedges, that the extent seemed almost limitless to the children. Indeed, during the first day or two they did not thoroughly examine the whole of their domain, being content with finding all sorts of charming nooks and corners, and showing them off to Jetty and Betty when the little invalid took the small walks which were permitted and recommended by the doctor.

He came to see them the first day whilst they happened to be at dinner. Letty, who was stationed a little way off from the rest, acting as "scout" to the party in the make-believe cave, gave quite a little scream as a man's shadow fell upon her, and springing to her feet, she seized the stick which lay beside her, and cried out at the top of her voice,—

"A spy! a spy! Save the prince!"

"Nay, good sir, but it is as friend to your prince that I come," answered Mr. Coburne, with a twinkle in his eye, grasping the situation, and entering into the spirit of the game. "Methinks your prince requires tendance, and I have some small skill in the healing art; wherefore am I come to put my poor skill at his gracious disposal. I prithee, therefore, faithful fellow, take me to him right speedily."

Letty's eyes glowed with delight at this address.

She lowered her uplifted stick, and with a little air of dignity strutted on before, saying,—

"In that case, honest knave, follow me. But if thou dare to hurt or betray the prince, I will dash out thy brains with my trusty staff ere thou canst say Jack Robinson!"

"Letty, Letty!" said Betty, shocked at this display of daring, "you mustn't talk so to Mr. Coburne. What would Miss Grimshawe say?"

"Never mind Miss Grimshawe now," said the young doctor, coming up to Jetty's side. "Your business is to forget all about her for a little while, and make friends with the birds and the butterflies and the sunbeams. My little friend there understands how to carry out my prescriptions. Be anything you like in all the world except little girls with lessons on the brain!"

"He's a nice man," Letty declared when he had presently gone, after professing to be too busy to join their feast. "He understands about things, and I like him. The prince shall make him a knight when he gets his kingdom again."

It was two or three days before Hetty and Letty made one of the most delightful of their many discoveries. Against the farthest off of the high walls —the one which was nearest to Falconer's Hall— the trees and shrubs grew so thick and dark that for some time the children did not suspect there was anything hidden behind them. But one day Hetty

came running to Letty with a rather scared face to tell her she had heard *such* funny noises under the ground near to the wall, and would Letty come and listen too.

Full of curiosity and wonder, Letty ran off to the place; and sure enough there was a very odd noise seeming to come from somewhere underground not far away. Hetty was not frightened when she had her other half with her, and the curiosity of both children was keenly excited.

"Shall we ask Betty to come—or nurse?" asked Hetty; but Letty shook her head decidedly.

"No; we'll find it out for ourselves. Come along, Hetty. We'll creep in here and get nearer to the wall. We shall hear better then. O Hetty, do look here! Why, here's a bit of a lovely old ruin. Oh, why didn't we find it before? It's a real live old ruin! And I expect it's a ghost tapping down there. You know ruins always have ghosts with them."

"O Letty! But if it's a ghost, shan't we be frightened? People always are."

"I shan't be!" answered Letty stoutly; "not in the day, when it's light. I've always just longed to see a ghost, but nurse says there aren't any left now. But she didn't know there was a ruin left either. If there's a ruin, there can be a ghost too. Perhaps it was a knight who was buried alive by the monks down there ages and ages ago, and he's always trying to get out."

"But he can't, can he?" asked Hetty, who was rather inclined to hope he could not.

"Perhaps we can help him!" cried Letty, who seemed much too excited to be afraid. "Perhaps we can help him to get out; and then we shall find his bones, and bury them in a nice grave in a nice coffin; and after that the poor ghost will be quiet, and won't tap any more. I've read about things like that."

"I don't think I want to find his bones," said Hetty, with chattering teeth; but she could not help following Letty, who was pushing through the tangled shrubbery to where there were certain fragmentary bits of ruined building, which excited their keenest admiration and interest.

"He's snoring too," whispered Letty, as they got near to the wall. "I read about a snoring ghost once; but that was owls. It may be owls now, Hetty; so don't be frightened. But if owls are tapping and trying to get out, I think we ought to help them. Perhaps they've been asleep all the winter in a cellar, and somebody has shut the door. It wouldn't be kind to go away and not to let them out."

"If it's owls, I don't mind so much," said Hetty, who was burning with curiosity, although she lacked Letty's nerve; "but I think we ought to call Betty first."

"I don't," answered Letty quickly. "It's our

discovery, and I want to find it out by ourselves. Oh, take care! here are some steps."

Letty had tripped and stumbled, for the ground suddenly gave way under her feet. Amid the drift of dead leaves and the growth of ferns from the masonry, she had not noticed that there were some steps leading down into a small cave-like recess. But she quickly recovered herself, and plunged boldly down. The sounds both of tapping and snoring were very clear to her now. She would not admit it even to herself, but she was just a little afraid, despite her overwhelming curiosity.

"I'm down," she said in a whisper to her sister above; "and it's a door, and the ghost is just on the other side. Will you come too?"

"I don't think I dare. O Letty, do come back!" cried Hetty from above, in the subdued whisper of fear.

Letty was not quite sure that she would not. It was rather more uncanny than she had bargained for. Indeed, she had taken a step or two backwards from the door, and was just about to remount the steps, when suddenly the door seemed to give way with a crash, and wheeling round she found herself face to face with a little boy—a boy whom she had seen once before, sitting by Lady Adair's side in church, but with whom nurse had said that they could never have any play or friendship, because their father would not allow it.

CHAPTER VI.

A SECRET FRIENDSHIP.

THE children stood staring at one another speechlessly for a full minute. Bill had placed himself beside his master, as though to protect him if necessary. But seeing that there was no attempt upon the part of the little girl to molest him, he came forward slowly and sniffed at her legs as though to make sure of her respectability.

Letty was not in the least afraid of animals. Indeed, it was the one trouble of her life that they were not permitted to keep any pets.

Caspar had been so astonished at the apparition of the little girl upon the other side of the door, that he could not find a word to say, and it was Letty who first spoke; but she did not appear to be addressing him, and her words were very strange ones, he thought.

"It isn't a ghost after all," she said; "it's only a little boy and a dog!"

Caspar had taken off his cap, and now he made a step forward.

"Did you think I was a ghost?" he asked.

"Well, yes, of course I did," answered Letty, with a touch of *hauteur* in her voice. "I heard some very queer noises coming out of the old ruins underground. I couldn't think of anything but a ghost for it to be. It's always ghosts that do make those queer noises in old ruins."

"And did you come to see? I think you must be very brave," said Caspar, who was not at all sure that he would have cared to await the appearance of a ghost from the heart of the earth.

"Oh, as for that," answered Letty, "I'd rather something happened than nothing. And besides, I always wanted to see a ghost.—Is that your dog? Does he always snore like that? May I kiss him? I should like to have a dog with a turn-up nose like that; but Miss Grimshawe won't let us."

Letty plumped down on the bottom step of the flight and took Bill fearlessly round the neck. He licked her face, and she kissed him many times, and then looking up at Caspar, she said,—

"As you've got such a dear dog, I don't mind your not being a ghost. I was just a little angry at first, but we'll be friends now if you like."

By this time Hetty was very cautiously descending the steps, hearing the sound of voices, and having received Letty's assurance that there was no ghost in the question. Caspar looked with admiration at the two pretty little girls, who, in spite of holland blouses

and a certain amount of dishevelment, managed to retain a great deal of the dainty grace of aspect which it had been Miss Grimshawe's aim and object that they should acquire.

"You are the little girls I saw in church," said Caspar. "You live at Falconer's Lodge."

"And you live at Falconer's Hall with Lady Adair," said Letty. "And you are our deadly enemy."

"I'm not!" answered Caspar indignantly. "I should like to be friends and play with you."

"Oh yes, so should I," answered Letty eagerly. "That's all right. I only mean there's a deadly feud between our houses. But that only makes it more interesting, you know."

Caspar was not certain that he did know. He was not sure if he understood what a deadly feud was. He was not steeped in historical romance like Letty, and was not so well up in what was the right thing to do under these strange circumstances.

"Deadly feuds can be very nice things," explained Letty, still caressing Bill. "I think it's more interesting when the people have one. They can make friends just the same; only it has to be a deadly secret. I like secrets; and I should like to make friends with you like that."

This was more encouraging. Caspar came a step nearer, and Hetty descended to the same level. It was an odd scene for a meeting-place—a little recess underground, with only faint rays of light struggling

down from above. But Letty thought it quite the right thing—almost mediaeval, in fact.

"I should like to be friends with you very much," said Caspar. "I shall ask my grandmother if I may."

"If you do," said Letty promptly, "it won't be a secret any longer, and that will just spoil everything."

"Will it?" questioned Caspar doubtfully.

"Of course it will," said the little girl, in the same incisive way: "for if she says no, you can't come any more; and if she says yes, there won't be any feud. And that'll spoil everything—won't it, Hetty?"

Hetty was by this time seated on the step beside her twin, caressing Bill with great fervour. Bill thought it very nice to receive so much notice from two pretty little girls, and wagged his thick, strong tail with great vehemence.

"We like secrets best; it makes things more amusing—more like books," she said. "This is quite like a thing in a book. Letty said all the books were stories—I mean lies—because things never happened to us. But this is quite something—isn't it, Letty? We never had a little boy to play with before."

"No, nor a feud-boy either," reiterated Letty, full of her leading idea. "I don't know that I should care so much about the boy if it were not for the feud," and she gave a little upward glance at Caspar through her long eyelashes.

As a matter of fact, Letty had often greatly longed for a boy playmate; but she had an idea that boys were disposed to think too much of themselves, so she felt she must make it plain at once to Caspar that she held him rather cheap.

Caspar, however, was not at all inclined to assert himself. He felt much more disposed to play the suppliant, and be the humble servant of these pretty little girls. Life in the big house and garden had begun to seem just a little lonely, in spite of the companionship of Bill and Pat. Indeed, Pat had some light duties of his own to fulfil about the place, so he was not always available; and though Bill was quite a comrade and friend, he could not exactly talk, and Caspar had been used to a good deal of human companionship in his Indian home, and on ship-board also, so he felt the loss of it rather keenly.

When, therefore, he found that he had unwittingly opened up a way into the garden which contained the little girls he had seen in church, he was exceedingly pleased, and his only fear was that he might be doing something disobedient in making their acquaintance without his grandmother's leave. But, as Letty said, it was always more fun having a secret, and Caspar was willing to be persuaded, for surely it could not be wrong to make friends with one's next-door neighbours.

The question of the feud he did not understand, but he had a vague idea that there was some mystery

about the inmates of Falconer's Lodge, and that made it more interesting. Mrs. Diggles had said things which he had not fully understood, but which bore out what Letty was trying to enforce upon him. Evidently there was something strange about it all, and Caspar was quite alive to the fascination of a romance.

"What's your name?" asked Letty suddenly.

"Caspar Adair," he answered promptly.

"Haven't you got something else besides? Don't people call you Sir Caspar?"

"They do now—some of them," he answered; "but nobody did till my father died. He was Sir Caspar then."

"Don't you like being Sir Caspar? I think I should like it very much. It sounds so mediaeval—as if you were a knight."

"I don't like it much. It makes me remember about father, and miss him so much;" and there was a glint of tears in Caspar's eyes, for this was a subject he seldom touched upon.

"Do you miss your father so very much?" asked Hetty softly.

"I miss him every day," answered the child.

Letty gave her head a decisive shake.

"That seems funny, now," she said, "for we don't miss ours at all—not the least little bit. I don't think we should miss him even if he were to die—do you, Hetty?"

Hetty looked a little shocked at this outspoken candour.

"I don't think it's quite nice to say things like that, Letty," she said, rather timidly, for she seldom reproved her more independent twin.

"Well, I don't know about that," was the quick reply. "Only I couldn't help thinking that it would have been nicer if Caspar's father had lived and ours had died—if one of them *had* to die, you know. One can't help thinking things, you know, and that's what came into my head," and Letty gave it a defiant shake, as much as to say that she had the courage of her opinions and was not afraid to speak out.

Caspar was distinctly fascinated by the bold independence of the dark-eyed little girl. He thought it was very kind of her to want his father to have lived when she had never seen him.

"What is your name?" he asked, going a step nearer and laying his hand on Bill's collar, to keep him from being too demonstrative in his affection.

"Oh, it's a stupid, long, affected name—Letitia; but everybody calls me Letty."

"And what is yours?"

"It's Henrietta; but everybody calls me Hetty."

"Yes," added Letty, "and we've two sisters besides. The biggest is called Elizabeth, but we call her Betty; and the next one is called Janetta, but we call her Jetty."

"So all your names rhyme," said Caspar admiringly. "How nice and funny! And are your sisters as pretty as you?"

"You'd better come and see," said Letty, getting up from the step with as much suddenness as she had sat down. "They're out in the garden now; we'll take you to see them."

"Do you think I may come?" asked Caspar wistfully.

"Of course you may, if we give you leave; it's our garden."

This seemed unanswerable, and Caspar was satisfied.

"But stop a minute," cried Letty, when half-way up the steps. "We mustn't let anybody see you, because you're a secret, you know. We mustn't forget about the deadly feud. We don't want to have you killed in our garden. We must take care."

Caspar looked rather taken aback.

"Who would kill me?" he asked.

"Well, that depends who you are," answered Letty. "We must just decide about that. But you'll have to be a fugitive, you know; and we shall have to look after you, and see that no harm comes to you. We are the scouts, who do that sort of thing; but sometimes it's very dangerous. You must always keep your eyes open, and be ready to hide or to fight."

"It's part of a game we play," whispered Hetty to

Caspar, who was looking rather bewildered; and when the little boy had fully understood this, he entered with zest into the idea of being a fugitive in hiding.

He did not know nearly so much history as the little girls, who had not only been much more regularly taught, but also delighted in historical romances, which they read diligently in their spare hours. But he had a much wider acquaintance with such fascinating themes as jungles, tigers, snakes, and Indians; and Letty, with a courageous defiance of fact, was eagerly ready to transfer Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald to the wilds of a tropical jungle, and to make Caspar a friendly prince, who had lost all in the good cause, and was in hiding from the anger of his father's dusky soldiers.

Caspar was delighted to play his part in such a delightful kind of game; and the tangled shrubberies gave them ample space for many exciting adventures with tigers and crocodiles—for Letty was resolved that there should be crocodiles too, and a little dried-up pond was found to be the resort of these scaly monsters.

"Now you and Bill must lie hidden under these laurels," said Letty at length, "and we must go and tell the prince that you are here, and ask if he will receive you. When you hear me call like this—" and Letty uttered an odd little cry, easily to be recognized—"then you must come creeping out, and we

will take you to Prince Charlie, and you must kiss his hand and swear fealty to him. And then you must say something loyal to Flora Macdonald, because when Prince Charlie gets his kingdom he will marry her, and they will be king and queen. We count her like our Queen now."

"I shall like that," said Caspar suddenly. "I want to be a good servant of the Queen's."

Letty and Hetty left their new companion lying hidden as arranged, and crept out themselves into the path, and ran towards the corner where Jetty's couch stood.

The elder little girls were enjoying the new story-book, although always ready to enter into the never-ending game of the twins. Indeed, they all enjoyed the atmosphere of romance in which they lived and moved just now, and Letty's inventive genius was seldom at a loss in devising new developments and excitements.

"May it please your majesty," began Letty in her grandest way, bowing very low, "we have discovered a very noble follower of your highness, who has suffered many things in the good cause. He was buried alive in a wall ten feet thick by his unnatural sire, and he has only just succeeded in digging himself out, with the aid of his dog, and was lying at death's door when we found him. May we present him to your royal highness?"

"Certainly you may," answered Jetty, who was

"A delightful kind of game."

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quite well used to the introduction of imaginary adherents, generally represented by Hetty dressed up in some borrowed plumes. But to-day Hetty was standing by, quivering and glowing, and the elder sisters supposed that either Mr. Coburne or the garden-boy had been pressed into the service.

Letty went a few feet away and uttered a curious little call, and almost immediately there came the sound of footsteps on the path, together with a rattling sound, almost like the scuffling of an animal. The next moment Jetty uttered a little cry of amazement, for a dog had actually come racing round the angle of the house, and was jumping up first upon Letty and then upon Hetty with every evidence of affection and recognition; whilst almost at the same time there appeared from the same direction a little boy with curly hair and wistful, dark eyes, who was led forward to Jetty's couch by the flushed and triumphant Letty, where he at once bent the knee, and took the thin little hand lying on the rug and kissed it.

"I am your majesty's very humble and devoted servant," he said; whilst Letty hopped from foot to foot in her excitement at the sensation produced.

Jetty looked at Betty, and Betty looked at Jetty. They were so astonished they scarcely knew what to say or do. Caspar had made his little prepared speech to both the sisters before they recovered from the shock of their surprise.

"You are little Sir Caspar from Falconer's Hall," said Betty at length.

Caspar looked at Letty as if for instruction, and she promptly came to his assistance.

"That's what he is in his own country; but here he is Prince Nabob Golconda, and he has slain ten tigers and twelve elephants and five crocodiles in the jungles, and been hunted by his cruel father, and buried alive in the wall, as I told you. If you like, we will show you the place where he got out."

"But how did you come, really?" asked Betty.

"He came through the wall," answered Letty eagerly. "Hetty and I heard him tapping, and Bill was making funny noises. We thought it must be a ghost. But it wasn't; it was Caspar. We waited till he got through, and then we talked. He's quite nice, though he is a boy. He's going to play our games with us. We can do lots more things when we've got a boy to help."

"I should like to play with you if you would let me," said Caspar, looking from one to the other. "I've nobody to play with on my side of the wall —only Bill. He's very nice and kind, but I should like better to play with you."

Bill was by this time making love to Jetty, who received his overtures with great delight. The little girls had always longed to have animals about them, but Miss Grimshawe would not hear of it. Letty and Hetty were both talking eagerly to Betty, who

was rather like a little mother to them, and who had to be persuaded that to let Caspar come and play with them was a delightful secret, but must be kept as one because of the "feud."

Betty was sorely tempted to acquiesce in the arrangement. She was almost sure their father would not mind, so long as he was not troubled; and as for nurse, she always was pleased for her children to enjoy themselves, and had often said she wished they had little companions to come and play with them. Miss Grimshawe was safely out of the way, and, as Letty kept on reiterating, they had been told they might go where they liked, and do what they liked, provided they did not go round to the front of the house or get out by the gates.

"If you tell," urged Letty, "it will spoil everything. You know how it is when there's a feud. People stop things, and they can never be nice again. But when the secret goes on, then it always comes right. It can't be wrong to make friends with Caspar. You know we ought to love our enemies, and he isn't an enemy. It's wicked for people to quarrel and hate each other. If we can heal the feud, it will be doing something quite good; only it must be secret at first."

Betty quite sympathized with this view of the situation. She had been told a little about the standing quarrel between the Tyrrels and Adairs, and it always seemed a very foolish one to her.

It was surely much better for neighbours to live together in peace and friendship. Nurse always said that if their mother had lived the quarrel would have been brought to an end. Perhaps Letty was right in thinking that it would be a good thing to make friends with little Sir Caspar. Betty, indeed, quite thought this herself, but she shrank a little from the responsibility of the secret.

"I'm sure nurse would want to say yes," said Letty shrewdly, "if you were to ask her; but she mightn't know if she should. I think it would be kinder not to ask her, but just to do it of ourselves. If we are punished afterwards, I don't care. It would only be like the early Christians, who were killed for being good."

Letty's arguments and Caspar's wistful eyes at length conquered Betty's scruples.

"I think perhaps we might play together," she said at last, "if you don't think your grandmother would mind, Caspar."

"I don't think she would," he answered. "She is always kind to me, though I don't see her so very often. I asked her once if there were any children for me to play with; and she said she was very sorry, but she did not know of any little boys near enough to be any good as playfellows."

"She didn't say anything about little girls?"

"No; perhaps she did not think I should care about girls. But I do; I like them better than boys

—at least I think so. But I've never played much with anybody but grown-up people."

"Grown-up people aren't much good at games," said Letty, with a shake of her head. "They just do what you tell them, but they don't think of things themselves. It must be very dull to be grown-up. I hope I shan't grow up for ages. But I don't think I could get as stupid as most people do. I should go mad, I think—it would be so dull."

Then the children got talking together, and soon Jetty was all eagerness to go and see the place where Caspar had got through the wall into their garden. The idea of a real ruin was enchanting; and Jetty was by this time so much better that she could walk about a good deal in the garden, and was learning to know it quite well.

But none of the children had before to-day made their way through those dense shrubberies against the wall to where the fragments of the old ruin stood more or less built up into it.

The gardeners never penetrated here; the place was quite wild and untended. None but children could well have crept through the tangled path which had once wound in and out; but children can penetrate through most obstacles, and soon they had all examined the little recesses and fragments of ancient building, and had already decided a hundred delightful uses to which they could be put in furtherance of their plans.

"Nobody would ever find us here!" cried Letty. "Nurse could never get through. She would just have to call if she wanted us. We could play fugitives here for years and never be found. Jetty could have some rugs and lie under there, and we could bring her everything she wanted. Even if Miss Grimshawe came back, she could never find us here!"

This was the acme of human happiness—not to be found out by Miss Grimshawe's hawk's eyes. Life could contain no greater joy than this. The little sisters looked at each other with a sense of delighted triumph. It was indeed worth having a secret if one could have such a delightful nook in which to hide it from the eyes of the world.

"But do come and see my ruins!" cried Caspar; "they are ever so much nicer than these, and just as secret. Nobody ever comes there. We shall be quite safe; and if we were to hear a footstep, we could fly through the door and hide ourselves here. But do come first and see my crypt! It's like a big cellar, only it has such a pretty roof with arches. Grandmother said it was called a crypt once. She says I may have the ruins for my very own, and do just what I like there. So I may have you to play in them, I know. We can have such games."

Letty was almost out of her mind with excitement and delight.

"A ruin! a ruin! a real live ruin!" she cried; "oh, I never thought anything half so lovely ever

could happen! I began to think there weren't any ruins left; and people get so stupid when they grow up that I don't believe they ever build any more. I asked Miss Grimshawe once if they didn't, and she told me not to talk nonsense. That's just like a grown-up," concluded Letty, with a vigorous contempt; "they never do understand, they are so stupid!"

Caspar gave Jetty his hand to help her down the steps, and with beating hearts and wide-open eyes the four little sisters passed through the door, and found themselves in the dim, vaulted crypt. For a moment Jetty clung rather tight to Caspar's hand, half afraid of the cold, strange place. But soon all four little sisters broke into exclamations of delight and astonishment at the wonders revealed to them; and their surprise and excitement only increased when Caspar led them up some steps and out into the sunshine, and they saw all the fragments of the old building lying about them.

"It's the most beautiful place that ever was!" cried Letty, throwing herself down at last in a perfect ecstasy of delight. "It's better than any book that ever was written, because it's all real. I don't care if there isn't a ghost, though I daresay we shall find one some day. We shall have just the loveliest games and the loveliest times. A ruin and a secret are just the two things I've always wanted most!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LADY'S BOWER.

CASPAR walked up towards the house that evening feeling very much as though he were moving in a dream, or like somebody who has just awaked from a very vivid dream and scarcely knows which is dream and which is reality.

Was it really possible that he had been playing all the afternoon with the little girls from Falconer's Lodge, whom he had never dared to hope he might even know?

They had played at being so many different persons, and there had been such an atmosphere of secrecy and make-believe thrown over the events of that afternoon, that Caspar felt a little natural bewilderment and uncertainty as to who he was and who his companions had been. But he felt that life had suddenly become much more interesting to him. A whole new world of fancy seemed to be opening out before him. He felt that the horizon of his life had suddenly expanded.

What nice, gentle little girls they were, and how

pretty! Caspar had never played with little girls in India, and the pair on ship-board had not attracted him. They were rough and wild in their ways, and laughed at him and teased him. He much preferred the grown-up people.

But these little girls were quite, quite different. Letty, to be sure, had plenty of force and fire about her. She was not always gentle, and sometimes she could speak quite sharply. But she was so funny and clever. Caspar admired her immensely. He liked to see the sparkle that came into her eyes when she was excited. He even liked the way she stamped her foot and shook her head when she was impatient or angry. He had never seen anybody the least bit like her. He wished, for the first time in his life, that he had some sisters to play with.

"But we can pretend to be brother and sisters," he said to himself. "Letty can pretend anything; and it always seems as if it were really true. I got quite frightened when she was pretending the enemies were coming—she does it so well. I think I like Letty the best; but they are all very nice. I wonder why it has to be a secret, and why I may not tell grandmother."

For Letty at parting had impressed it very urgently upon Caspar that it must be a "deadly secret" because of the "deadly feud." Caspar had very small comprehension as to the reason for this; but as Letty had been so insistent, he had given way. He was

sure when she was talking that she would never want him to do anything wrong (and indeed Letty had no idea of anything beyond the fascination of a delightful secret); but as he walked to the house he began to wonder whether he ought to keep this secret from everybody, and in puzzling over this he was so quiet that Mrs. Diggles, whilst dressing him to go down to dessert, wondered if anything were the matter.

Caspar, however, looked remarkably well. He had more colour in his cheeks than he had yet gained, and his eyes were bright and smiling. He did not look as though anything were amiss with him, and Mrs. Diggles dismissed him with a smile and a kiss, thinking he was more like his father than ever.

Lady Adair kept rather earlier hours than most people, and her late dinner was a simple affair, so that Caspar could come in to dessert before it was quite bed-time. He had a seat set for him opposite to his grandmother, just as at lunch-time; and as he enjoyed his strawberries or grapes he would tell her in his sedate way what he had been doing, and what discoveries he and Bill had made.

At first he had been rather timid of talking to his grandmother, but by this time he had grown quite certain that she liked to hear all about things, although she did not talk much herself. She wanted him to enjoy himself, and she had been talking about a pony for him to ride, when she could be sure of finding a safe one. Caspar had ridden in India, and

thought it would be nice to ride here; but to-day he forgot to ask whether the farmer who was looking out for one had heard anything satisfactory. He was still engrossed in his own thoughts, and was so silent and abstracted that Lady Adair looked several times at him, bending to get a better view of his face through the screen of flowers that adorned the table.

At last she asked a question,—

"Is anything the matter, Caspar?"

He started, and said "No;" but his face showed traces of self-consciousness, and Lady Adair was a little perplexed.

"You have nothing to say to me to-day, it seems, Caspar, so I thought perhaps something was the matter."

"Grandmother," said Caspar suddenly, "may I have a secret?"

His face burned as he put the question, and his eyes eagerly sought her face.

"Come here, my dear," she said slowly, "and let us talk about it a little."

He slid off his chair and came and stood beside her, glowing and eager, and full of a subdued excitement. Little as he knew it, the resemblance to his father as a child, which Mrs. Diggles upstairs had noticed, was very strong indeed now. The elder Caspar had been just such a bright-faced, eager boy as Caspar was at this moment, full of his new ideas.

"You want to have a secret, Caspar? Do you mean you have one already?"

"It came to-day," he answered; "Bill and I found it out. I've been thinking about it ever since. I want it to go on being a secret."

"Then why do you tell me anything about it?" asked Lady Adair, looking intently into his face.

He looked back with candid good faith.

"Grandmother," he said, "I wasn't sure at first that I would. I wanted it to be quite a secret—a deadly secret, you know. I didn't mean to say a word to anybody. But then it came into my head that perhaps that wasn't being quite obedient—not like obeying the Queen properly. That's what I was wondering about. If soldiers wanted to have a secret, wouldn't they ask the Queen if they might first? I think Captain Rutland would. He loves the Queen so very much, and so do I."

Lady Adair smiled; she knew something of Caspar's loyalty of spirit, and regarded it approvingly. But now she asked,—

"What has the Queen got to do with your secret, Caspar?"

"Well, it's not the Queen exactly; it's you, grandmother. You are my queen here, you know; Captain Rutland said so. That's why I want to ask you if I may have a secret; because if you say I mustn't, I suppose I mustn't, and I should be *so* sorry."

He looked appealingly into the face above him, and put out his hand and laid it on Lady Adair's knee. She took it in hers, and asked quietly,—

"Where did you find this secret, Caspar?"

"In the garden, grandmother."

"Oh, it is in the garden, is it? You do not have to go outside to enjoy it?"

"No, grandmother; it's all in the garden."

"Look at me, Caspar. If your father were here, do you think it is a secret he would mind your having? Is it a secret you would be afraid or ashamed to tell to him?"

The tears started to the child's eyes, as they almost always did at the mention either of father or mother. He looked fearlessly into his grandmother's face and answered very earnestly,—

"Oh no, grandmother, I am sure he would not mind. I should not be a bit afraid to tell him or mother. I think they would be very pleased."

"Then you may keep your secret, Caspar, and enjoy it," answered Lady Adair. "You can keep it as long as you please, and nobody shall interfere with it. If your father would approve, that is all we need trouble about. What he approves I approve. You can make the most of your secret."

"Oh, thank you, grandmother," cried Caspar, lifting his face for a good-night kiss, "you are so kind to me."

He went to bed with a mind completely at ease and a busy brain teeming with ideas. His beautiful secret was his own to enjoy. He had relieved his conscience, and he need not trouble any more about the feeling of deception which had weighed upon him

at first. He knew his father and mother would like him to be friends with the dear little girls next door, and make an end of the deadly feud, whatever that might be. All quarrels were naughty—he knew that well enough; and he rather fancied from what Letty said that their father was rather a cross, naughty man, who made quarrels about nothing. He was sure his grandmother would not do it; besides, Mrs. Diggles said it had begun long, long ago, before anybody could remember. It was probably like one of those silly quarrels in history all about nothing that Letty had told him about. Only, as Letty explained, if there had been no quarrels and fighting in history, it would have been very stupid, and not proper history at all; and there would have been no nice games to play at about escapes, and dangers, and lying in ambush, and being betrayed. And after all, if grandmother did not mind, it was rather more fun having this secret, and playing in the ruin with the little girls, than it would have been if he had had to go round to the front door and ring the bell and ask for them each time.

It was much more like a thing in history, Letty had explained. And Letty knew lots and lots of history, only she thought it very hard that they could not live in historical times, when things were interesting, instead of a stupid time when history was all done and nothing amusing happened.

Still, they could play at amusing things; and

Caspar lay awake quite a long time thinking over a plan of his own. There was one fragment of the ruin that he had not shown to his new little friends that day. He had kept it for the last, because it was the best; and then suddenly they had heard their nurse calling them in to tea, and had had to run away before they could see it.

And it was the best piece of all the ruin—the most perfect and charming in every way. Caspar himself had not found it out for several days after he had made acquaintance with the ruin, for the only way of getting to it was through a sort of tunnel under a very overgrown wall, the ivy on which hid the opening; so that it was not till Bill suddenly rushed in, barking and excited after a supposed rat, that Caspar suspected the existence of such a delightful place.

He went down the tunnel after Bill. After he had gone a little way in the dark, he saw a light at the end; and when he came out at the other side, he found himself in a sort of octagonal enclosure, the walls of which rose high above his head on one side, though they were low and broken in other places. Part of the roof had fallen in, and was lying in great blocks upon the grass which made the floor of the room; but part of it still remained, and was beautifully groined and fluted, and the fragments of the windows were quite beautiful too, with their delicate stone tracery.

But the best of it all was that the sun shone into

this little chamber almost all the day long. The trees and the ivy on the wall made a sort of softening shade; but the sunbeams danced in and played there all the day, making it warm and pleasant. And as Caspar lay thinking what he could make of this charming retreat, he suddenly exclaimed,—

"I know! I shall get a lot of those old cushions and curtains up in the attic, and I shall take them there and make a throne for Jetty. And it shall be called the Lady's Bower, and it shall belong to her and Betty; and we will only come when we are summoned, because they are the queens and we are their servants."

All this was so exciting that it was long before Caspar could go to sleep. But sleep came at last, and with it dreams of all sorts of strange and wonderful things; so that when he woke up quite early in the morning, it took him some time to disentangle things in his head, and make out what was real and what he had only dreamt.

But soon it all came back to him—the little girls, his secret that he might indulge in without any qualm of conscience, and his plans for the adornment of the Lady's Bower.

As soon as he thought of that he jumped out of bed, and Mrs. Diggles hearing him, put her head in at the door to know what was the matter, for it was an hour before his usual time for getting up.

"Oh, but I want to get up," pleaded Caspar; "I

have so much to do. I can't go to sleep again. It's about the secret. I want a lot of time. Please let me get up and begin."

So Caspar's toilet was hurried on, and very soon he was free to go where he pleased and do what he wanted.

His first visit, however, was not out of doors, but upstairs into the old attics, where he had been allowed to amuse himself on wet days. There were wonderful stores to be found up here—old furniture that had become too shabby for the other parts of the house, yet which had been long in the family, so that the mistress did not like to part with it; old curtains, more or less worn and moth-eaten; cushions in like case; odds and ends of broken armour from the walls; curious boxes; stuffed animals—every sort of thing you can imagine, all jumbled up together in confusion, although they were all kept clean by the under servants, who were turned in for that purpose from time to time under the eyes of Mrs. Diggles.

Caspar had been greatly fascinated by watching one of those cleaning bouts, and had taken a fancy to a number of things, which he was allowed to carry down to his nursery. Indeed, his grandmother told him he might have anything he liked out of the attics if Mrs. Diggles did not mind; and several things had been taken by Pat into the different garden arbours, where he had a fancy for sitting.

And now he spent two long hours in marching to

and fro, from the attic to the Lady's Bower, carrying things out to furbish up the place and make it worthy of its name. Luckily he had a light wheel-barrow of his own; for he had a bit of garden which he tended assiduously, and tools and barrow had been supplied to him. It was a great help having the barrow to wheel the things in, for he did not want to take anybody into his confidence—not even Pat—about this new project of his; and yet if he had had to ask help from him, it would have been hard to keep the secret.

When he had got everything together he set to work, and soon the place began to wear a wonderfully different aspect. Under the angle of the roof where it was most perfect, and where the sunshine lay the warmest, a whole pile of cushions was skilfully arranged to form a luxurious couch, which couch was covered by a great skin rug, rather the worse for wear, but very imposing for all that. A curtain was fastened up behind to hide the roughness of the wall. Indeed, it was this very roughness that made it easy to arrange the curtain; for you could push the folds into the great cracks and hold them fast by wedging in stones. Then beside the head of the couch he set a little three-cornered chair for Betty, and a small carved table for their books and work; and then he began arranging the other articles he had selected, and making the room look furnished and fine. Some old halberds were set up in one corner. Several skins of wild beasts were laid on the ground wherever

there was protection from the rain if it were to fall. The broken armour was set in order upon the different ledges of the broken masonry, and a stuffed fox, whose bright green eyes glinted very knowingly, was set in a dark corner, where he looked a good deal handsomer than he was.

Caspar gazed round him in delighted pride.

"It's just a perfect Lady's Bower!" he said. "I'll run in and ask Cookie for something nice to eat; and then I'll go and find the little girls and bring them out."

Cookie was one of Caspar's most devoted slaves; and luckily for him, she had generous ideas in the matter of supplies for the little boy's private larder. She thought that good food and plenty of it was the best thing to bring back the colour into the pale cheeks, and he never appealed to her for stores without going away laden with good things.

He had now an ample supply to set out in tempting array on the table he had set up—a piece of board upon two queer old boxes. He had some antique knives and spoons, which he had rummaged out and cleaned as best he could. They did not look very bright now, but he thought Letty would prefer them in that condition to a state of greater perfection.

When all was ready he called to Bill, and made his way down into the crypt, and to the door which he had forced open yesterday with such wonderful results.

"Oh, here you are, sirrah!" cried a sharp voice the moment he appeared; "I thought you were never coming."

Letty was the speaker. She had been waiting for quite half an hour for Caspar's appearance, and was a little ruffled in consequence. She thought he would have come to seek them; but as he had not done so, her curiosity and impatience had drawn her to the door in the wall, and she had awaited him with a growing sense of irritation.

"I'm afraid you are a sluggard, boy. We've been up this ever so long."

Caspar felt this rather hard after his early rising and laborious toil; but he was not quick of speech like his little girl friend, and so he only said meekly,—

"I came as soon as I could."

"I suppose boys and men are made slow and stupid," flashed back Letty, with a toss of the head. "Perhaps you can't help it; but come along now. We're going to play Lady Jane Grey in the Tower now that we've got a ruin; and we shall have insurrections and things. Do you know what an insurrection is?"

Letty, however, did not trouble to wait for an answer—she was running on ahead—and it was Hetty who added in explanation,—

"We shall have insurrections to make her queen instead of Bloody Mary. You know about Bloody Mary, don't you? She wanted to kill all the good

people and only have bad ones left. So the good people had to make insurrections; but she went on killing them all the same."

Caspar thought all this would fit in very well with his new place of retreat. He brisked up, and said with an air of decision,—

"If the queen's majesty is in danger, we must find her some place of safety to hide in."

Letty turned round at that, and nodded her head approvingly.

"Right, sirrah!" she exclaimed; "but where is such a place to be found?"

"I think I can show you," answered Caspar, his face flushing with excitement; and very soon all the little girls were breathlessly following him first through the crypt, and then with still greater excitement along the dark, narrow passage into the octagonal room beyond.

"Oh," cried Letty, with eyes wide with astonishment, "it's a real live secret chamber! I didn't believe I should ever see one."

"What a darling place!" cried Jetty, with beaming face. "O Caspar, why didn't you show it us yesterday?"

"Because I wanted it to be worthy of your majesty," answered Caspar, with a low bow. "It was bare and empty before, not fit for your highness's reception. I was up with the lark this morning to make it ready. Your majesty will be safe here

from all intrusion. I have tried to make it comfortable."

He gave Jetty his hand and led her to the couch. She lay down upon it with a little sigh of rapture.

"O Betty, look! Look at the roof, and at the ivy, and at the stone-carving, and everything! Isn't it lovely! How happy we shall be! And nobody can ever find us out. Shan't we have lovely games?"

Jetty had not looked so bright and well for a long time. She did not even care to lie down long upon her couch. She liked to sit up and take her luncheon at the queer little table. Children can generally eat, and although it was still early, they did full justice to Cookie's nice things. Bill sat up and stared at them, and they all fed him with choice morsels; and Caspar whispered to Jetty that he would bring his nursery cat out after lunch, and see if she would stay there. She and Bill had quite made friends by this time, and were rather fond of each other in a kind of cat-and-dog fashion. They would play together in quite a funny way, with a great show of growling and swearing; but they both enjoyed the game, and Caspar enjoyed watching them.

"The cat would come in for a witch's familiar spirit perhaps," said the inventive Letty; "and Bill does for a lot of things, he is so sensible. Now don't let's waste any more time eating. Let's put the rest of the things into one of the boxes in case of a siege, and we'll begin our game"

The game lasted a long time, and was played with great gusto. Caspar had never before known what it was to enjoy a real game of romps with children of his own age. Letty was a capital tonic for him. She ordered him about, laughed at his blunders, kept him in order, and yet fascinated him completely the whole time. He always felt that her eye was upon him, and he did his utmost to please and satisfy her. He called Jetty his queen; but he stood much more in awe of Letty's bright black eyes, which seemed to be everywhere at once.

He learned more history in a morning with these little new friends than he had done all his life before at lessons. It is true he got his people and facts a good deal jumbled up; but he learned a good many facts which he found afterwards, to his gratification, were quite true; and he had to take so many different characters, that it was rather bewildering to know which side he really was on. But it woke him out of his dreamy, solitary ways, and made him bestir both body and mind. He had a better appetite for lunch when he went in than he often had when he had eaten no lunch in the middle of the morning; and he was so hot and dishevelled when he went to the nursery to be tidied up, that Mrs. Diggles marvelled what he had been doing.

"But I won't say a word," she said to herself. "I'm glad for him to be dirty and untidy like other boys; it shows he's happy. He's got some plan on

hand—that's very clear. He's been a different child all day."

"Well, Caspar, and how is the secret getting on?" asked his grandmother at lunch; and he gave a happy, responsive smile as he replied,—

"Oh, first-rate, thank you, grandmother. And it's just the nicest secret that anybody ever had!"

With that answer, and with the look upon Caspar's face, Lady Adair was content. He was happy, and that was what she wanted above everything.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. KINGSCOTE'S PICNIC.

CASPAR was gazing up into Mrs. Kingscote's face with shining eyes. He was standing a little way off, yet he heard every word she spoke to his grandmother.

"I hope you will let your little grandson join my children's picnic on Wednesday if it is fine."

"A children's picnic!" repeated Lady Adair, with a note of doubt in her voice; "I should scarcely have thought there were children enough in the place for such a thing."

"Oh, but there are. I give it every year about this time. It is true we have not many children just in the parish; but I collect from a radius of several miles round, and I always gather between twenty and thirty. We generally have Queen's weather, and I think my young folks enjoy themselves. I hope you will let little Sir Caspar join us."

"Where will the picnic be?"

"At Gaythorne's Farm—seven miles away, just under Adderly Edge. I always think no picnics are

quite so successful as those at the farm. There are great barns to shelter in from heat or showers, and a wood where we can have gipsy tea; and the farmer wrote me he had just cut his first hay, and asked if I would not bring my little folks down for a good romp in it. He and his wife are the kindest souls, and put the whole place at our disposal for the day. And there is unlimited cream, and hot scones baked by Mrs. Gaythorne, and eggs gathered from the nests by the children for themselves. I thought we could not do better than accept the invitation; and we are to go on Wednesday if it is fine, and failing that, on Thursday."

Step by step Caspar had drawn nearer, and was now gazing up into Mrs. Kingscote's face with eager, wistful eyes. He had heard of this picnic from his little friends. It was their one dissipation in the course of the year, and they looked forward to it with the most eager delight. Caspar had been longing to know whether he would be invited. Betty had said she thought he was certain to be; but Letty had said in her quick way,—

"I don't think he will, because of the deadly feud, and if he were, I don't believe Lady Adair would let him go, in case he should meet us!"

So Caspar had been in a state of great ferment and excitement, and now he held his breath, awaiting his grandmother's decision.

Lady Adair noted the look on his face, and although

she had been hesitating before, she now smiled down at him.

"Do you want to go so very much, Caspar?"

"Oh yes, grandmother, please! I've been longing and longing for ever so long—ever since I heard there was generally a picnic for children."

Mrs. Kingscote smiled, and patted his head; whilst Lady Adair, who was also smiling, said quietly,—

"Well, Mrs. Kingscote, as you are so very kind, I shall be pleased to send Caspar if it is a fine day. I hope he will be a good boy, and not get into mischief."

Caspar gave quite a little spring into the air, his face flushed from brow to chin. Whilst he was cutting his little capers, the two ladies spoke together in an undertone, and Caspar only caught a few words.

"They need not see much of each other; there will be quite a number besides. I will see to it," said Mrs. Kingscote; and his grandmother replied in her dignified way,—

"Caspar knows nothing, and probably they do not either. Such things are far better kept from children. I wish things were otherwise myself; but Mr. Tyrrel is obdurate. Still, upon this occasion we need not trouble ourselves. As you say, there will be plenty more."

Caspar did not fully understand these words, but it seemed to corroborate what Letty had said, and to

give an atmosphere of mystery and romance to his secret acquaintance with his little neighbours, for it must surely be of them that the ladies were speaking.

Wednesday came at length, though it seemed long in arriving, and all the longer because Caspar had not been able to visit the Lady's Bower in between. Upon bright, fine days, such as they were now having, Lady Adair often planned little amusements for Caspar—such as sending him out in the dog-cart with the coachman and Pat to see some place of interest, or in driving him across to a friend's house where there were other children, with whom he could spend the day.

Caspar thought it was very kind of people to ask him, and to want to make him happy; yet he sometimes felt that he was really happier playing in the ruins with his little girl-friends, enjoying his "secret," and being lectured and ordered about by Letty.

The Lady's Bower was an immense success. It was a delightful place for Jetty's hiding-place or state apartment, whichever she might most want. The ruins were never invaded by alien feet; and if they were, nobody would ever find the way to the Lady's Bower, where the children always scurried like so many startled rabbits whenever they heard the footfall of a gardener approach their domain. Nurse Deborah from the Lodge knew that the children had found some warm nook of their own in the remains of the old ruin at the back of the shrubbery; and as

there was no path to it, and her joints were stiff, she never sought to explore their retreat. They came in when they were told. They assured her they were warm, and sheltered, and always dry; and Jetty was looking so much stronger and better that it was plain the new regimen agreed with her. So no troublesome questions were asked on either side, and the children kept their precious secret, and enjoyed this clandestine friendship in the whole-hearted way only possible to little people.

And now they were to meet for the first time somewhere else, and Caspar wondered whether he ought to speak to them as though he knew them, or whether he must "play a game that they were strangers," as Letty had once said when they talked about the possibility of meeting at the picnic.

But when he arrived at Mrs. Kingscote's he was saved all trouble in deciding. The four little Tyrrels were already packed away into one wagonette, and Caspar, as soon as he appeared, was set upon the box-seat of the other; and as they were driving along the summer lanes, he telegraphed a question to Letty, and understood in a moment, from the vehement frown and shake of the head he received, that he was not to let out the secret at any price.

It was a beautiful drive, and Caspar liked talking to the man who drove the horses, asking questions about all they saw. He knew a good deal more about all the cottages and people than the coachman

at home did, and everybody nodded to him as they passed along the road.

Presently they turned off from the main road into a shady lane, and by-and-by they began to catch glimpses of an old-fashioned gabled farmhouse, with a wood behind it, and green meadows running down the slope of the hill in front—meadows with waving grass standing high and thick; and by the stream at the bottom other meadows much more green to look at, where cows were feeding amidst the tall buttercups and great ox-eyed daisies.

"Oh, what a pretty place!" cried Caspar; and the driver smiled and nodded, and said there wasn't a prettier place than Gaythorne's Farm in all the country round.

Caspar was delighted that this charming place should be their destination; and soon the two great wagonettes had rolled into the yard, and the little people were being kindly welcomed by the burly farmer and his rosy-faced wife, whilst such a clamour arose from the dogs of the place, aided and abetted by ducks and geese and chickens, that all the children began to laugh and shout with amusement, and nobody was shy for a single minute.

Bill had been allowed to come for the day's pleasuring. Caspar had asked Mrs. Kingscote if he might run with the carriages, as he never got tired, and enjoyed so much being with his little master. Bill was now welcomed in rather a growling fashion

by the dogs of the place, and there was a good deal of good-humoured skirmishing about, with a showing of teeth and a make-believe of hostilities which amused the little people a good deal. But the farmer had his dogs well under control, and Bill was very good-tempered in spite of his savage looks, so there was no real attempt at fighting; and soon dogs and children together were careering down to the big meadow where the hay was being tossed into the air, and where they could romp and bury each other and play games to their hearts' content.

"Let's have the 'Last Days of Pompeii,' and all be buried in the ashes and lava!" cried Letty, who was always a leading spirit in whatever company she found herself. "Miss Grimshawe had a book called that. It was a stupid, grown-up sort of book; but she used to read us little bits, and it was fun when the ashes and lava came and everybody was buried.—Farmer Gaythorne, Farmer Gaythorne, will you let us have some of those nice sticks you gave us last year to make little houses with? Then we can make a nice, big house for us all to live in, and by-and-by we'll have an earthquake, and it shall all come tumbling down. I think Bill would do for the earthquake; he can dig and rummage."

Then Letty stopped short, for it would not do for her to know too much about Bill. However, nobody was noticing particularly, as the children were scattering all about the field, and Mrs. Kingscote was

making Jetty and another delicate little girl comfortable on a haycock in a shady corner, where they could watch the game and amuse each other.

Bill ran about after Letty, who was a prime favourite of his, in a way that was rather disconcerting; but, after all, people were too busy to pay much heed to the dog; and presently Letty let Caspar come up and talk to her, though she held herself rather stiff and grand, peeping round under her eyelashes to see if anybody were looking, and making believe to act like a grown-up lady when she is first introduced to a stranger.

"Isn't it fun?" she asked, with a sparkle in her eyes. "It's such fun that nobody knows we know each other. They think we have never met before. Mrs. Kingscote put us in different carriages on purpose. I daresay now, if she sees us talking, she will be in quite a fright. That's because of the feud, you know. I daresay she thinks you have a dagger or a pistol somewhere, and that you'll try to kill one of us. That would be like an assassin, you know. Assassins are very interesting in books. Would you like to be one, if I could borrow a pistol or a knife? I would let you fire it at me if you'd promise not to hit. Assassins quite often used to miss, you know."

Caspar looked rather doubtful. He did not much desire the new office thrust upon him, but he did not want to offend Letty.

"I don't know how to fire a pistol," he said.

Letty tossed her head rather scornfully.

"Then I don't see the use of being a boy. Boys ought always to be able to do these things. And as I said before, you needn't hit—in fact, I'd rather you didn't. We were reading about a man the other day—he was an assassin; and it said that he shot at a man with 'such deadly accuracy of aim that, though he missed the man he wanted to kill, he killed somebody else instead.' Mr. Coburne came when we were reading about it, and he laughed very much, and said he thought he must have been an Irish assassin. Do you know what he meant?"

"No," answered Caspar, shaking his head; "Pat's an Irishman, though he's not an assassin. I'll ask him."

"Well," said Letty, after a moment's pause, "if you won't be an assassin, let's come and have an earthquake with Bill. But if you would try to stab or shoot one of us, it would make it very nice for the feud; and if they did put you in prison, we'd come and get you out. It's quite easy, you know, if you have a beetle and a bit of string and a rope. I know all about escapes, and I often think it would be quite interesting to go to prison for a little while."

"I think you're braver than me," said Caspar, with a grave defiance of grammar; and Letty sighed a little impatiently, and wished she had been a boy instead of Caspar. She could have thought of so many amusing things to do which he never seemed to care for.

However, the earthquake game was a great success. It was very easy to build up make-believe houses with the long benders the farmer sent for, roofed in with armfuls of hay. And then Caspar, with Bill to help, would set to work to demolish the houses and bury the luckless inhabitants, who would scream and try to rush away, but nearly always got covered with hay; in which case they had, by Letty's rigid rule, to "fall down dead," because it was really ashes and lava and houses that were falling upon them.

Time passed so quickly in this entrancing way that they were quite surprised when they received a summons to dinner. But they found they were all very hungry after their exertions, and set up quite a shout of delight as they saw the tempting repast spread out for them.

The picnic dinner was laid out in the wood behind the house, in a little dell that seemed made for fairy banquets. There was a spring bubbling up in the centre, and close to that were slabs of rock, which formed excellent tables for the delicacies provided, whilst the soft dry moss was better than any sort of chairs that could be invented. And the little people were soon formed into a large ring round these natural tables, whilst Mrs. Kingscote and the farmer's wife stood in the centre and handed out platefuls of delightful fare.

The children were hungry; the food was delicious; and the farmer's wife had added strawberries and

cream without limit. It was Mrs. Kingscote who had to set bounds to the consumption of these good things; and when at last the repast was over, she proposed that the children should sit in the shade a little while longer, and tell stories, instead of going back to the hot hayfield whilst the sun was quite so high in the sky.

The little people were quite ready to fall in with this suggestion, and were called upon in ages for a story either real or invented, as the case might be. There was a good deal of laughing and fun over the blundering attempts of some of the children, whilst others told their story very prettily and fluently—Betty and Jetty both distinguishing themselves by spirited narrations of fragments of historical romance. Letty's was perhaps the most spirited of all, though a little incoherent and wild. It bristled with murders and hairbreadth escapes, and held the listeners entranced for a full quarter of an hour.

Caspar proved to be, by a little gap, the youngest of the party, so he was called upon last. He felt rather diffident, for he had never told a story in his life to such a large audience.

"You can tell about India, and the tigers and snakes," said Letty, in a loud whisper; "or being on the big ship, and being shipwrecked on a desert island."

"But we weren't shipwrecked," objected Caspar.

"But you can *pretend* you were!" was the im-

patient response; whereupon Mrs. Kingscote came to the relief of the little boy by saying,—

"You shall tell us what a big ocean steamer is like, and what people do with themselves on a voyage; and that will do quite as well as a story."

Caspar managed to tell about the ship very prettily and graphically; and the children were interested and pleased—all but Letty, who still kept clamouring for a wreck and the desert island.

"But I never saw a shipwreck," repeated Caspar. "I asked the captain if he didn't ever have any; but he said he was glad to say he'd never once lost his ship or had her badly disabled. I don't think he could have been a very good sort of captain."

"An old stupid!" asserted Letty, very decidedly. "What's the good of having a ship if you don't wreck it sometimes?"

"That's what I said," returned Caspar; "but they used to laugh at me."

"That's because they were grown-up," remarked Letty. "Grown-up people don't understand."

"Perhaps it is the little people who do not understand," said Mrs. Kingscote, smiling. "Think, children, what a terrible thing a shipwreck really is—the cruel green waves rushing over the beautiful vessel; the terror of the people, and the dreadful loss of life! I do not like to hear you talking even in jest of such sad and sorrowful things."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Kingscote," cried the irrepressible

Letty, "it's only the people who *don't matter* who are drowned—just the stupids whom nobody cares about, and perhaps a villain or two, who want killing off. The nice ones always get away to a lovely island and have such fun. And by-and-by a ship comes and takes them off. But I should want to stay. It always gets stupid when they leave their islands."

Argument was plainly thrown away upon Letty; so Mrs. Kingscote merely replied, with a smile,—

"Well, Letty, you wait till a shipwreck really does come, and see what you feel about it then I don't think you will want another experience."

"Ladies are always frightened if there's danger," said Caspar quickly. "The sailors told me so. They always have to get them out of the way first before they can do anything."

Letty's face flushed rather hotly.

"Men are always so wonderfully brave!" she said, with a toss of the head.

"I think they are, generally," answered Caspar innocently.

Mrs. Kingscote, fearing something of a wordy battle, interposed with the suggestion that they should explore the wood for a little while; and after that had been done, Mrs. Gaythorne took them into her sweet, old-fashioned garden, and showed them her roses and lavender bushes, her ducks and chickens and guinea-fowls. And so the time slipped away delightfully,

till they were summoned to the gipsy tea in the dell.

It was immense fun boiling the kettle—hanging it from crossed sticks, and putting burning sticks in a little heap underneath. The cakes, too, were delicious, brought hot from the oven; and so were those that came out of Mrs. Kingscote's baskets.

After tea there was still an hour for play; and the great excitement was a pair of little ponies, who were brought out saddled and bridled, one for a boy and the other for a girl; and the children were allowed to mount them and ride round the field as often as they liked.

The elder children took their turns first; but as some amongst them had ponies at home, they presently wandered away in search of other amusement. But Letty was all in a quiver of excitement to have a ride. She had ridden before on these visits, and had found the exercise delightful. If only the others would finish, and let her have the pony to herself!

At last she got her wish; a few boys lingered, but the little girls had all run away. Betty and Jetty had both had their turns, and Hetty was not sure she wanted one; she had been rather nervous at some of the antics the pony cut. She preferred, at any rate, to wait and see how Letty fared.

A big farm-boy lifted the little people off and on, and led the ponies if desired; but he was ready to do as he was told about that. The boys generally

despised his aid, though, as the pony grew excited by the sport, he sometimes kicked up his heels and sent his small rider flying over his head.

But the ground was soft, and little folks fall light; nor had they very far to fall, so that laughter and fun greeted all these mishaps. The little girls' pony was quieter and steadier, and was more often led by the boy. But when Letty got on she would have no help. She would ride alone, she said; but Caspar might run beside her if he liked.

Caspar was waiting his turn for the boys' pony; but somehow he did not feel any great desire to mount the little fellow. He had told Letty and the other children that he always rode a pony of his own in India, and that he was going to have one at his grandmother's soon. He could ride quite well, he said; and this was no idle boast, for he had ridden almost from being a baby. Yet he began to feel quite sure that he did not want to ride to-day, and he could not think why it was.

He liked much better trotting about with Letty, though it was rather hot work. She had not a bit of fear, and switched the pony and made him canter, and only laughed when she bumped up and down in trotting. She stuck on like a little monkey, and her merry laugh rang out again and again; but at last, when they reined up at the end of the field, the other pony was standing quite at liberty, and she cried out gaily,—

"Now get up, Caspar, and we'll have a gallop together."

Caspar stood irresolute, wondering why he hated the thought of getting on the pony. He flushed and then grew pale.

"I don't think I want to," he said slowly.

"I believe you're afraid!" cried Letty, with flashing eyes.

He did not answer, but stood looking miserable and ashamed.

"I thought men were always so brave!" cried the little girl, in a most cutting voice.

"I'm not a man," said Caspar, feeling very small in both senses of the word; "I'm only a little boy!"

"But you can *pretend* to be a man!" cried Letty, to whom this was a mere contemptible subterfuge. "You do pretend you want a shipwreck and all sorts of things that only brave men care for, and now you're afraid of a miserable little pony. I don't believe you know how to ride! I believe you've just told lies!"

"I haven't," cried Caspar, stung to anger. "I did ride once—I had a pony of my own—but it seems such a long time ago."

"It's not so very long. I've not ridden since we were here last year, but I'm not afraid. Get on, you coward, or I'll tell the queen that you're a caitiff minion, and she'll never let you be her servant any more!"

"Letty on her pony."

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This threat was too much. Anything would be better than to receive such awful names as that. Caspar set his teeth very hard, and mounted the pony with the help of the grinning lad.

"Shall I lead him for you, sir?"

But Caspar could not submit to that indignity with Letty's scornful eyes upon him.

"No, thank you," he said, his heart beating like a sledge-hammer, the colour dying from his cheeks. He felt that his hands were trembling as he gathered up the reins, and he was certain that the pony knew it too.

"Come on!" cried the impatient Letty.

She held a little switch in her hand, and she gave a little cut to both ponies as she spoke. In a moment they were off, racing along side by side, Letty's joyous laugh sounding gleefully through the air.

Two minutes later Caspar was lying in the field, whilst Letty on her pony, with the other one racing alongside, was careering triumphantly along.

For a moment the little boy hoped he was killed, or at least so badly hurt that Letty would be sorry for him; but soon he realized that he was not hurt at all, but only terribly frightened—so frightened that the tears would come do what he would to hold them back.

When Letty came riding back flushed and exultant, it was to find Caspar sitting forlornly in the middle

of the field—"just blubbering like a baby!" as she indignantly told Betty.

"He is a horrid little coward!" she said. "I don't believe I'll ever play with him again."

At any rate she did not speak to him or notice him all the way home.

CHAPTER IX.

A "COWARD MINION."

CASPAR told his sad story to his grandmother that very night at dessert, the tears standing in his eyes.

He had come in only just in time to give an account of his day before going to bed, and the pleasure of the earlier hours had been altogether dimmed by this melancholy termination.

He was afraid that his grandmother would be vexed, and push him away from her side. He knew his father was a brave man, and it seemed so dreadful for his son to be a coward. And it was quite true what Letty had said: the Queen would not want cowards amongst her servants.

But to his relief his grandmother did not push him away, nor was her face severe when he raised his eyes to it. He had told his story very truthfully, only keeping back the fact that the little girl who urged him to ride with her was one of the children from the Lodge.

"Why was I afraid, grandmother? Am I really a coward?"

"I hope not, my dear. I believe not."

"But I was afraid, and I fell off from fear. I didn't want to stay on; he frightened me. Why was it, grandmother?"

"Well, Caspar, I don't know if I can make you understand. It is a thing that often happens to older people after they have had a shock or an illness. We call it losing their nerve."

"But I haven't been ill."

"You were ill in India before they got you to the ship, and you had had what doctors call a shock before that. You need not be afraid that you will always feel as you did to-day. By-and-by, as you get quite strong, you will feel the old courage come back."

"Really and truly, grandmother?"

"Yes, my dear, I quite believe so. Have you been afraid of anything else since you came that you used not to be?"

"I sometimes feel when Mrs. Diggles takes the light away at night that I should be rather afraid of the dark if it weren't for Bill having his basket quite close to my bed, so that I can touch him when I want."

There was a little pause, and then Caspar said,—

"Do you think I ought to have a pony soon, and make myself not frightened by riding every day?"

"I shall ask Mr. Coburne what he thinks about that before doing anything more in the matter. And meantime, Caspar, you can do something for yourself to conquer these new fears."

He looked up eagerly.

"What can I do, grandmother? Do you mean that I can think about the Queen, and what she would say if she saw me being a coward? I did think afterwards that if I'd remembered that, perhaps I shouldn't have slipped off the pony directly, just because I was frightened. Letty—I mean the little girl who was with me—said you could do a great deal by just pretending."

"Yes," answered Lady Adair gravely, "there is some truth in that. We can sometimes brace our nerves by trying to fancy that some person we want to please is watching us. And that brings me to what I was going to say, Caspar: for you know there is Somebody who is always watching us; Somebody who wishes us all to grow up brave and true and fearless; Somebody who can help us to be all this and more if we can only trust Him and take Him at His word. You know what I mean, Caspar?"

The little boy nodded his head. He was impressed by these words, because it was very seldom that Lady Adair spoke to him in this strain.

"You mean God, grandmother?"

"Yes, my dear, I do. God can give you courage

as He gave His Son courage to bear and endure so much in our flesh, through the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit. Do you ever ask Him to help you, Caspar?"

"I say my prayers, grandmother. Do you mean that?"

"Yes, partly; but I mean something more than just repeating a form morning and evening. I mean that God is always near you, ready to help you; and that when any special need or trouble comes, He will give you special strength to bear and conquer if you ask Him earnestly, and believe that He has the power and the will to do it for you."

"You mean that if I ask Him to make me brave again He will?"

"Yes; I mean that if you ask Him to conquer in you that fear which you know to be weak and foolish, He will do it. There is only one thing of which we need and ought to be afraid in this world, and that is sin—the devil and all his works. Other fear than this is needless, often foolish, and should be fought against. God will help us to conquer it if we trust Him and trust His promise. You know, Caspar, that you have been made His soldier and servant unto your life's end, and that the name of His Son is upon you. That is even a greater thing than being a soldier or servant of the Queen's, which you want so much to be."

Then she kissed the child and sent him to bed,

and Caspar went away more comforted than he had dared to hope.

"I will try to be brave," he said to himself. "I am sure grandmother is brave, and so was father. I've got a lot of names to be brave for. I'll try as hard as hard not to be afraid any more, except of the devil and all his works."

Caspar did not go to the Lady's Bower next day; he was not quite sure of the reception he might meet with. Betty had said that Jetty was very likely to be too tired to come out of doors after the picnic; and if she and her special sister were absent, Caspar felt that he might have rather hard measure dealt him at Letty's hands. She might even refuse to play with him at all. She couldn't bear cowards.

So he made a round of the farm with Pat—a favourite occupation of his; and after his early dinner he went out into the garden with a book, and sat under a tree whilst the gardeners mowed the lawns by the aid of an old pony—a process that Caspar always found it fascinating to watch.

Presently the pony had done his task, and was unhitched and about to be led away. Then a sudden thought came to Caspar, and he ran across to the gardener who held him.

"Will you lift me on the pony, Ryle, and let me ride him back to the yard? You can lead him, as he hasn't any saddle on."

In a minute, before he had time to think of being

frightened, he was astride the little rough pony, and had his hands fast in his mane. Ryle held him by the head, and walked him soberly across the wide expanse of lawn towards the door which led into the stable-yard.

"I'll tell you why I wanted to get on him," explained Caspar. "I had a ride on a pony at the farm yesterday, and I was so frightened I tumbled myself off on purpose. In India I was never frightened, and I don't like it. It made me ashamed; so I thought I'd try again to-day. I don't feel afraid of this pony—not whilst you lead him so nicely."

It was rather an effort to speak of his cowardice to a servant, but Caspar thought it was right to tell the truth. The man gave him a very friendly smile.

"Things often come like that, sir," he said. "When I was a little chap, an old cow chased me round a field. I thought she was a bull, and for quite a long time I was afraid to go near a horned creature of any sort. Bless your heart, we all get our bits of scares sometime when we're young; but it goes off soon enough. You can ride fine; I can see it by the way you grip with your knees. It'll all come back to you quickly enough."

This was very encouraging, and Caspar felt his heart swell.

"Would you make him trot just a little, Ryle?" he said, his heart fluttering but his will steady.

"Hold tight then, sir, and I will," answered the

man; and the old pony was encouraged to break into a steady jog-trot, Ryle putting out a cautious hand ready to seize the child if he should be the least unsteady.

But after the first few moments Caspar felt his courage coming back. He did not exactly enjoy the experience, but he was not in terror of falling off. He knew Ryle would take care of him, and he braced his will and his nerve against that feeling of helpless fear which had conquered him before.

"That's fine, sir," said the man, when they reached the yard. "Why, you'll ride like a—like a—'senator,' don't they call it?—one of these days."

Caspar wasn't aware how senators did ride, but he flushed with pleasure at the implied praise.

"You're a nice man, Ryle," he said; "and I should like to have a turn with you on the pony every day if you had time. It's a very nasty feeling to think you're a coward!"

"Bless you, sir, there never was a coward yet in your family, and never will be one; and I'll be proud to help you any day, if you'll let me know."

So Caspar went back to his tree and his book much more happy in his mind. He felt that he had made one step forward on the road back to manliness and fearlessness. He couldn't truthfully say that he had felt no fear, but he had, at least, conquered his fears that time, instead of letting them get the upper hand of him.

The next day he went to the Lady's Bower once again, though in some slight fear of the reception he might meet with. He did not enter by the regular way, for he had a suspicion that Letty might refuse him entrance. But he resolved to try to get in by climbing over the wall where it was lowest, and letting himself down by the ivy. He and Letty and Hetty had all scrambled up to the top of the wall from the inside to repel imaginary assailants from without; but they had never climbed down on the outer side, as the fall was rather greater, and Betty had advised them not. When Betty advised anything, then Hetty gave it out as a royal command, and even Letty was constrained to obey.

But Caspar knew it was easier to climb up old walls than to climb down them, and there were all sorts of cracks to help him, as well as the ivy branches. He heard voices within as he approached the walls, and Bill bounded off to find the usual entrance—for Bill, with all his many accomplishments, had not yet learned to climb walls.

"Here's Bill!" he heard one of the children call out. He knew Letty's voice when she spoke; but he was not always able to distinguish the others apart unless he saw the speakers. "Bill, darling, come and kiss us! Is Caspar coming?"

"He's got to be tried for misprision of treason when he does come!" cried Letty's unmistakably trenchant tones. "He's a coward minion, and I'm

going to take him prisoner and have him tried for his life. We've never had trials and executions yet. I shall be the executioner."

This was all rather alarming; but Caspar was finding his way up the wall without much trouble, and he hoped by finding a new way in that he might appease Letty's righteous wrath.

"What *is* misprision of treason?" asked another voice.

"I don't know, and I don't care!" answered Letty boldly. "It can be anything we like. People were always being tried for it in history times, and were executed too. We can make it being a coward minion—which he is. I shan't play with him any more till he's been executed for it."

"Oh, look! look!" cried Hetty suddenly, with a little scream, half of terror, half of delight. "Here's an enemy getting over the wall. Oh, save the queen! save the queen!"

"It's the coward minion!" cried Letty, stamping her foot and brandishing her weapon snatched from the wall. "He daren't come in by the right way. He's sold himself to the enemy, and is leading them over the wall. I said he was a traitor and a deserter. —Shall I shoot him dead, your majesty?"

"No, no!" cried Jetty, half afraid of all this commotion; "let him get down in peace. Perhaps he brings tidings. Let him come and say what his news is."

"He's no business to come that way," argued Letty, who had arranged a sort of booby-trap in the tunnel, and was not best pleased that Caspar had unconsciously evaded it. But Caspar had by this time climbed down, and was kneeling to kiss Jetty's hand and ask pardon for having startled her.

This was speedily granted; but Letty was not satisfied till she had brought her string of charges against the coward minion, as she insisted upon calling Caspar, strenuously demanding his execution, as no coward was fit to live in the queen's service.

Caspar was quite willing to be tried and executed, and afterwards be somebody else; but he was destined to find that even the dramatic representation of an execution, in which Letty figured as the headsman, did not serve to allay her contempt for a comrade who had shown himself a coward.

She was always throwing little taunts at him; she even called him by the odious name she had invented, which Caspar thought a little unfair, seeing how he had been tried and executed and buried under that appellation.

He thought she might let him start fair in his new character; and so did Betty and Jetty, who often called her to order. But Letty was not easily daunted or convinced; and it was galling to Caspar, when playing games of battles and midnight attacks, to be suddenly called back and put behind the wall in

safety, Letty remarking (in her capacity of general of the forces),—

"You must not be there; only brave men may lead the van. The cowards are fit only to stand behind the walls and shoot through holes. You stay there till I give you leave to come out. Do you understand?"

Caspar began to understand very well that he was in Letty's black books, and he did not like it at all. But it helped to keep him braced to his purpose of conquering his fears; and he went every day to find Ryle, and to get a ride upon the pony, although he had not yet found courage to tell Ryle to let go of his head and trot him alone. It seemed to Caspar a very long process getting back his courage properly, though Ryle told him he was "doing fine," and getting on first-rate.

One day during the week that followed Mrs. Kingscote's picnic a very exciting thing happened, which might have led to the discovery of the precious secret.

The children were all in the Lady's Bower together, and were indulging in a merry feast—for Caspar had brought a very well-filled basket that morning—when they suddenly heard the sound of a man's firm step echoing along the crypt, mounting the steps, and then, after a little pause, actually entering the tunnel which led to the Lady's Bower.

"What shall we do? what shall we do?" cried

Jetty, turning white and red in the same minute; "somebody is coming!"

"We shall be found out!" shrieked Hetty, though her voice did not rise above a little squeak.

Letty was the one who rose most quickly to the occasion.

"We mustn't be found together," she cried. "Caspar must be hidden."

If he had thought of it a minute earlier, he would have scrambled up the wall. As it was, he looked wildly round in search of a hiding-place; for to him too it seemed in that moment as though to be found feasting with the little girls would cause some terrible catastrophe.

"In there!" cried Letty, in an excited whisper, pointing to the little recess behind Jetty's couch, which was covered by the curtain.

In another moment Caspar had slipped behind it, although he disarranged the curtain a good deal in his haste. But at least he was quite concealed; and hardly had Letty pulled the folds a little straighter and dashed back to her seat before Mr. Coburne walked in, and looked round him with an air of amused surprise.

"Well, you have found a snuggery of your own. No wonder nurse says she never sees anything of you now. I never knew there was such a pretty bit of the old Priory left standing."

"But you mustn't tell!" cried Letty. "It's our secret; we discovered it. It'll spoil everything if

you go and tell. How did you find it out? Who told you?"

"Nobody told me, little secret-monger. Nurse said you had a place of your own in the bits of ruin at the back of the shrubbery; only she couldn't get to it, because there was no path. However, I thought I might try, and so I crawled under the bushes, and found my way down some steps and through a door. Then I heard your voices, and they guided me. Well, you couldn't have a nicer place for playing in. Does nobody ever disturb you at your games?"

For Mr. Coburne knew quite well that the children had penetrated into the domain of Lady Adair, and he was thinking what a capital thing it would be for the little baronet, whom he had been called in to see, if he could join in the games of this original quartet. But he knew that there was some long-standing dispute between the owners of the Hall and the Lodge, and he feared that even if he were to make such a suggestion, Lady Adair would not see how the thing could be done.

"Oh no, nobody comes," answered Letty, in perfect good faith, for she did not count Caspar as "anybody." "I don't believe anybody knows about it. It's a kind of secret chamber, don't you know. You must promise you won't tell anybody about it, or—"

She paused with her head on one side, and Mr. Coburne asked, with a provoking smile,—

"Or what, my little autocrat?"

"Well, I think we should have to wall you up," said Letty; "unless we could find an *oubliette* to drop you into. We've hunted and hunted for one, but we haven't found any. But we could wall you up very easily, because there are lots of stones everywhere. And then perhaps afterwards you would be a ghost. We always want a ghost to make things quite nice. Once I did think I heard one, but—oh well, it wasn't one," concluded Letty, a little lamely.

"What was it, then?" asked Mr. Coburne, amused.

"Well, part of it was a dog," answered Letty hastily; and at that moment Bill, who had been behind the curtain with his master, happened to push his way out.

"Hullo! here is the dog," said Mr. Coburne; "and I think I've seen the fellow before."

"Oh yes," answered Letty, with wonderful assurance (for in her own mind she was playing the part of the clever counsellor who was outwitting some spy who had chanced to find his way into their camp); "he belongs to the little boy in Falconer's Hall. He brought him to the picnic last week. He likes us, and he comes to see us."

The thought in the young doctor's head was that perhaps if the dog came the little boy would find his way in before long; however, he did not say as much, but only remarked that he was going next to

see the little boy at Falconer's Hall, wondering if he could find his way out without going all the way back.

"But he isn't ill!" said Letty indignantly.

"How do you know?" asked the doctor, with a quick glance.

"Well, he wasn't that day at the picnic, and he's always in church. I think he's only pretending."

Jetty's face was burning. Betty was making secret signs to Letty to be quiet. Hetty was looking as if some nervous fear were weighing upon her. Mr. Coburne took all these things in, but made no sign, just talking a little while to Jetty, and watching her walk about according to his direction, and then saying a general good-bye all round.

"Can I get into the garden of the Hall without going back the same way?" he asked.

Betty answered, the others being silent.

"Yes, you can; but I don't quite know how. Of course we don't go there; nurse wouldn't like it."

This was quite true. Caspar had often asked his little companions to come and look at "his garden," but Betty always shook her head. She did not think nurse would approve, and Letty was always afraid lest their secret should be discovered; so that all they knew of the gardens of Falconer's Hall was what they saw from their nursery windows, and this little corner, which was not garden at all, where the old ruin stood.

So the doctor went, and Caspar crept out of his hiding-place in quite a tremor of excitement.

"You'll have to run out, and make a big circuit, and come upon him unawares in quite a different place," cried Letty, in great excitement. "Didn't you hear he was going to see you? Why does he go to see you? You're not ill."

Caspar's face was crimson. It was very hard for him to say the next words, but he thought he should be a coward if he did not do so.

"It was because I told grandmother about falling off the pony and being frightened. She said she should have Mr. Coburne to come and see me; and he came last week. I didn't know he'd come any more."

Letty stared hard for a few minutes; then she burst out laughing, and pointed her finger at Caspar, who stood quivering and ashamed before her.

"Is the doctor going to cure you of being a little coward?" she asked.

Caspar hung his head, and Betty and Jetty both exclaimed in a breath,—

"Letty, you are very unkind and very naughty."

But Letty wheeled round with an air of injured innocence, though there was mischief and a spark of malice in her eyes too.

"No, but I only wanted to know. I never, never heard of a doctor coming to make cowards brave!— What does he give you, Caspar? Does he have a

'coward's mixture' in a bottle, and do you feel very brave after you've drunk it?"

The tears had sprung to Caspar's eyes. He had been teased so mercilessly by Letty about his timidity, that the subject had become a sore one with him by this time. Besides, he was really trying very hard to be brave, and he did think Letty might be a little kinder.

Other people thought so too. Betty looked quite grave, and on Jetty's face there was a flush of pain.

"Don't keep Caspar," said Betty, in her motherly little way.—"Run home, Caspar, or they will be coming to look for you. Don't mind what Letty says; she is in one of her naughty moods to-day."

That might be very true, but perhaps it was not the wisest thing to say in her presence. Letty ran after him calling out in mocking accents,—

"Go and take its medicine, the little darling coward! Go to the doctor and be made quite brave. Ask for some ghost pills and some pony powders. Go to the great pow-wow man to be made quite, quite brave!"

CHAPTER X.

NAUGHTY LETTY.

"LETTY, you are really very naughty."

As Letty could not deny this statement, she received it with a defiant toss of the head.

"I can't think what has come to you," continued Betty, in the same reproachful, half-motherly way in which she often spoke to her younger sisters if obliged to reprove them. "You are quite spoiling our nice summer holiday by being so naughty and unkind."

A flush came into Letty's cheek and a sparkle into her eyes. Not being exactly ready with a retort (for a wonder), she turned away to the window and began to sing a tune under her breath with an air of profound indifference.

Betty and Jetty exchanged glances, and Betty shook her head and sighed. She had promised to try to "say something" to Letty, but she had been afraid all along it would not be much good.

They were in their nursery to-day, for the rain was pouring down, and no going out could be thought

of. It seemed easier to try to say things when Letty could not bound away and get out of sight and hearing in a moment. And really Betty and Jetty had agreed that it was time something was said; for Letty was getting so overbearing to Caspar, and so rude and disagreeable whenever he came to play with them, that sometimes he stayed away for days together; which spoiled the pleasure of the others, and invariably made Letty exceedingly snappish and curt.

If Caspar stayed away, Bill stayed away too, and the interest of their games was materially lessened. All the children were exceedingly fond of the little boy, who seldom came empty-handed, and shared all his many beautiful books and toys with them. Even Letty was really very fond of him, and missed him almost more than anybody when he did not come. But Letty had got into a silly way of always taunting and scolding him, and she did not seem able to get out of it. She had a very quick tongue, and perhaps the admiration her sisters had shown for her quickness had spoiled her a little—as had, very likely, the very deference and preference shown for her by Caspar on their first acquaintance. He had been quite pleased to be Letty's slave, and had obeyed her commands gladly and eagerly. That had done all very well for a time, but it had made her inclined to be overbearing with him; and of late, since she had taken it into her head that he was a little coward, she never let him alone.

If she were friendly one day, the next she would be as bad as ever; and she seemed to take pleasure in thinking of all the most cutting things she could say to wound him.

He was very patient, and seldom answered her back (Betty wished he would have paid her back in her own coin, but that was not possible to him); but he felt it very keenly, and he had begun to come much less often to the Lady's Bower. The others freely told Letty that this was "all her fault." This was true enough, but it did not tend to make things better. An uneasy conscience is not a pleasant companion, and Letty knew perfectly well that she was being a naughty little girl just now; but somehow she did not seem able to stop being naughty. The things came into her head, and she said them before she had time to think; and then the very looks on the faces about her made her say more things. She was tired, too, of the games that they had played so contentedly for so long. She wanted to do other things that Betty said they must not. She wanted something more exciting.

It is generally the way with people who find their life dull. Letty had complained once that nothing ever happened to them; and then something had happened—quite amusing and exciting. But now she was tired of this, and wanted something else, and there did not seem to be any chance of getting it.

As a matter of fact, Letty had had enough of liberty

and holiday, and it would have been better for her if Miss Grimshawe had returned now and lessons begun again.

But there was no chance of this at present.

Miss Grimshawe's mother was lying very ill, and was likely to die. Mr. Tyrrel had written to tell Deborah that he had given her indefinite leave of absence. Mr. Coburne had written to him that Jetty needed a rest from brain-work, and was getting strength by this outdoor life; so he was quite content to let things go on as they were, and extend the holidays indefinitely.

The children rejoiced openly in this piece of news; but for all that it would have been better for Letty to have had some regular work again. Her mind was too active to be content without occupation; and the making and playing of games from morning till night palls upon the most determined of players after a great many weeks of it.

Perhaps the wonder was that, out of all the four little girls left so much to themselves, only Letty should have taken the "naughty fit." Nurse Deborah was very kind; but she had been always used to be the indulgent element in their lives, with Miss Grimshawe to take the active management, so that she was not very much good at enforcing her authority.

When Betty complained to her that Letty was growing so self-willed and naughty, she could only shake her head and tell Letty it was a sad pity to

see a little girl making herself and her sisters uncomfortable; and Betty could not be too explicit upon the nature of Letty's wrong-doing without betraying their cherished secret.

Betty was beginning to wonder if their precious secret had not been a mistake after all. She wondered if it had not been perhaps rather naughty to make friends with Caspar and play in the Lady's Bower without telling nurse. It seemed too late to alter things now, and Betty knew that nurse always wanted them to be happy and have companions; but things were not turning out quite so nice as they did at first, and Betty wondered if perhaps it was because they had done something not quite straightforward.

Letty's naughtiness appeared by no means at an end. She was more wayward, and what nurse called "contrairy," than anybody remembered having seen her before; and at last things came to such a pass that nurse actually sent her to bed an hour before the usual time, Hetty accompanying her of her own free will—for the twins had slept together ever since they had grown out of their cots.

"Hetty," said Letty, when they were tucked up in bed, "I've decided what we'll do. We'll run away!"

"O Letty, how can we?"

"Quite easily. I've got it all coming into my head. We'll run away. We'll get down to the sea; Miss Grimshawe says it's only thirty miles away. Then we'll look out for a nice old ship that looks as if it

would soon be wrecked, and a drunken captain, if we can—for the nicest adventures always happen when the captain is a wicked, cruel drunkard—and we'll be stowaways on his ship, and eat biscuit and make holes in the water-barrels, and have a lovely time down in the hold; and when the wreck-time comes we'll swim away to the desert island, and live happily ever after."

"But we can't swim," objected Hetty.

"Not now, but we can when we're stowaways; and there are always planks and barrels and things like that."

Hetty was getting sleepy, and assented easily to every proposition made by her sister. But she was rather alarmed to find that when Letty got up next morning she was still quite determined upon running away.

"I'm sick and tired of everything!" she exclaimed petulantly. "Everybody's nasty to me. Perhaps when we've run away they will be sorry."

That very day something happened to strengthen Letty's determination considerably, and to incline Hetty more favourably to the scheme. They noticed that nurse had been very quiet all day, and seemed rather disturbed and perplexed; and when they were sitting at tea, she came and said she had something to tell them, and the look on her face excited the children's curiosity to no small extent.

"I heard from your papa this morning, dearies,"

she said, "and he told me a wonderful thing. By-and-by he is going to come back here to live; and when he does, he will bring you a new mamma with him to take care of you."

A new mamma! That was an astonishing bit of news. Betty and Jetty exchanged wondering glances, and began asking eager questions, very few of which nurse could answer, for she had been told very little; but Letty sat turning things over in her mind, and she suddenly broke out,—

"She'll just be a horrid stepmother; and stepmothers always beat and starve and murder their step-children."

"Oh no, Miss Letty, my dear," interposed nurse quickly; "that's only the nonsense you read in fairy tales."

But Letty was not to be convinced; she shook her head fiercely, and her dark eyes glowed.

"But it won't matter to us," she whispered to Hetty, getting her into a corner by-and-by; "we'll run away long before she comes. Betty and Jetty think perhaps it will be nice. They are just like good little girls in the stupid books. I know she will be horrid!" and Letty proceeded to retail with savage satisfaction every brutality she could devise, which she assured the trembling Hetty would be inflicted upon them by the stepmother if they did not get away first.

Hetty had plenty of imagination, if she had not

Letty's sturdy courage; so she was easily persuaded, and began to look forward to the delights of a life of adventure shared with her twin. They only awaited the opportunity for making their escape, and that came before long.

Mr. Coburne had asked them to a little children's party he was giving one afternoon in his garden. His sister and her two little boys were staying with him, and he was getting a small party of children to meet them. The four little girls were to go. But when the afternoon arrived, Letty proved to be in her wildest and most unmanageable mood; and when nurse threatened her with being kept at home, she answered that she thought she'd better not go to the party, for "she felt it all over in her bones that she should be naughty all the time."

If that was the case, they all thought she would be better at home; and of course Hetty stayed with her. It did not occur to anybody to separate the twins. The elder pair were dressed and sent off under the care of the housemaid; but Letty and Hetty begged for their oldest holland blouses and most battered garden hats, and for leave to take some milk and cake out to the ruin and spend the afternoon there, not coming in till after tea-time.

Nurse gave them leave for all this, hoping that an afternoon's play would set Letty right again. They took the jug of milk and an ample supply of cake, and made their way along the garden paths, just as

they always did when they went to play in the ruin.

But Letty's heart was thumping with excitement, and Hetty's face was flushed and eager. They said not a word, however, till they had reached the Lady's Bower, and then Letty began to execute a wild, triumphant war-dance.

"Now's our time! now's our time! Drink the milk up, Hetty. Let's drink as much as we can, for walking will make us thirsty. But we'll carry the cake in our wallets, and get our money out too. They'll never miss us for hours and hours, and we shall be half-way to the sea before then!"

Excitement had made them thirsty, and the milk was soon drunk. Letty, meantime, had dug out from the store of nondescript articles collected in this place two old wallets with shoulder-straps that Caspar had once brought from the attic. They chose two nice sticks from the selection gradually amassed to serve as weapons, and they got from the chink in the wall their bright sixpences, which had played the part of "hidden treasure" in many of their games.

Caspar had once brought them each a bright sixpence, and these had always been kept in a hole in the wall. Letty was strictly honest, and took only her own and Hetty's.

"It will be heaps to take us to the sea," she said. "You get such a lot of bread in a shop for a penny, especially if you ask for it stale. We'd better have

ours stale, because we shall soon have to live on biscuit, which is very hard."

"But how shall we get out?" asked Hetty. "If we go back and round by the gate, perhaps somebody will see us."

"Of course we shan't do that. I know just how to do. Take your wallet and stick, and come along with me. I hope we look like two tramps. Nurse always says these hats make us look like scarecrows; and our blouses are very dirty too."

Hetty was very much impressed when she found that they were to make their way out through Lady Adair's grounds; but so Letty decreed. She had sometimes run a little way into the grounds with Caspar; and he had once shown her a little gate, which he told her led into the woods beyond the house and out upon the moors all round. Woods and moors just suited Letty's ideas. They would not be seen or stopped; and she knew in which direction the sea lay, because Miss Grimshawe had told her, and the sign-post pointed to the road which led to the nearest seaport.

It was very exciting stealing out by these strange paths; for although they knew that Caspar would be safely at the party, there might be gardeners and people about who would stop them.

But as it befell they met nobody, and soon found themselves in a delightful wood, through which nice wide paths had been cut; and when they had

wandered a good way on, they found themselves out on the wide moors, where Letty had always longed to go, only Miss Grimshawe would never let them leave the roads.

"Isn't running away fun?" she cried, as they raced and skipped along in glorious freedom; and Hetty agreed that it was. The sun shone, the fresh breeze seemed to be playing with them, and everything was bathed in a kind of golden glory.

"The sea is over there," said Letty, pointing rather vaguely, "so we'll just walk on towards it. We shall get there to-morrow quite easily."

"Isn't thirty miles a very long way?" asked Hetty.

"Not so very far," was the undaunted answer. "When we walk with Miss Grimshawe, we go three miles an hour—I've often heard her say so. But we go twice as fast alone when we run, and she's always an old slowcoach. So that's six miles an hour; and it won't be dark for three hours, so that'll be eighteen miles. And then we'll find some dear little place in a wood to sleep in, and to-morrow quite early we shall be at the sea. O Hetty, won't it be jolly to go to sea! I've been longing for it all my life!"

Everything seemed charming whilst the sun shone, and the cake lasted, and the children were fresh and lively. They found a little trickling spring once, and sat down and had a fine feast.

"If we eat up the cake, it'll save carrying it," Letty said; "and we can get some bread the first shop we come to."

So the cake was eaten, and the little travellers trudged on and on; and every few minutes Letty declared they must have covered a mile at least. Hetty began to get a little tired, but she would not say so; and it was very interesting to be in this strange place all alone, with the wide world before them.

Presently they struck upon a road, and Letty's experience of roads was that if you went on long enough you came to a shop where you could get something to eat. They were not hungry as yet, but, as she said to Hetty, they had better lay in stores; for they would want supper by-and-by, and breakfast the next morning.

It was a good deal more tiring walking upon the hard road than it had been upon the springy grass and heather, and Hetty began to feel a longing after the comforts of home and the kindly face of nurse. But she did not venture to hint such a thing to Letty, who strode on with a manful air; and by-and-by, sure enough, they did come to a tiny little hamlet, where there was a shop with provisions to be sold.

"I think I'll get biscuit," said Letty; "it'll be easier to carry, and more like what we shall soon have to live upon."

So she went boldly in and expended threepence

upon the hardest and cheapest biscuit the shop could produce. There was only a rather stupid-looking boy serving in the shop, so Letty asked no questions as to the route, but joined Hetty again, proudly displaying her stores.

"Don't you think we might stop and sleep here?" said Hetty timidly, beginning, now that the twilight was creeping on, to feel very forlorn and queer out in this strange place. Truth to tell, Letty was beginning to feel rather queer herself, but she would not let her companion see it.

"Oh no, we can't do that," she said, "we haven't got enough money; and besides, perhaps they'd murder us to get our other sixpence, and we must keep that for to-morrow. But it'll be much nicer in the woods. We'll find a dear little hut, and make a bed of leaves and moss, and sleep on that. Don't cry, Hetty! Why, if you cry now, what will you do when we are stowaways?"

Hetty's imagination would not stretch so far as that. She only knew she was footsore and weary, and wanted to be at home with nurse; instead of which they were wandering about twenty miles away from home, as she fully believed, with only a wood to sleep in. And though they had often wished to sleep in a wood, now that the time had really come, Hetty longed for her own comfortable bed as she had never longed for it before.

"Can't we go home?" she almost sobbed.

The runaways in the wood.

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"No, we can't!" answered Letty, almost fiercely; "we're miles and miles away. Do come on, Hetty! There's a lovely wood I can see not very far away. When we get there I'll make you a bed. I can't think what's come to you. Caspar couldn't be more of a ninny than you are now!"

Poor little Hetty only cried quietly as she followed Letty's eager footsteps. Letty had to assume a courage she was far from feeling, for if she had given way their plight would have been forlorn indeed.

The wood looked very dark when they got to it; but the moon was rising, and threw a silvery radiance around. At another time both children would have been delighted by the beauty of the woodland dells silvered like this; but Hetty shivered at every sound, and clutched hold of Letty's arm every time a twig cracked or the leaves rustled.

"I believe I heard a wolf!" she cried once, in an access of terror; and Letty was shaking from head to foot, for she too thought that the cry of the owls was the distant baying of some savage wild beast.

"I'll take care of you," she managed, however, to say boldly. "We'll soon find a cottage or a hut or a cave, and then we shall be quite safe."

Real terror had by this time dried Hetty's tears, and taking Letty's hand, they ran as fast as the uncertain light would let them on and on through the woodland paths in search of the friendly shelter they trusted to find.

And at last kind fortune so far favoured them that they came upon a little rough building that might once have been a woodman's cottage, but which had fallen almost to pieces. Still, there was enough left standing to afford shelter to the children, and Letty uttered a little scream of triumph.

There had been a small clearing here, and the moonlight could shine in quite brightly. Luckily it was one of those very warm, breathless nights which are not uncommon in August; and although the children's limbs were aching with fatigue, they were neither of them at all cold.

"Look," cried Letty eagerly, "look! there is quite a thick, soft bed of leaves, and it's quite dry too. We shall sleep as soft and snug as possible. Come along, Hetty; I'll cover you up and make you comfy. After all, it is rather fun to run away!"

"I'd rather be at home," said Hetty piteously. "I want my bath and some bread and milk."

"We'll get a beautiful bath in some pool to-morrow," assented Letty; "and here's a biscuit for your supper. It's rather hard, but you must get used to that. We shall have to live on biscuit for a long while now."

Hetty was too worn out to resist when Letty laid her down on the pile of leaves, which either the wind or some other benighted traveller had collected in such a soft mass within the sheltering walls. She could not eat the hard biscuit; but she went to

sleep almost directly with one in her hand, and forgot her troubles in dreamland.

Letty lay down beside her, very weary too, but not quite so sleepy, her active brain keeping slumber for a time at bay; but by degrees her eyelids closed, and she also fell asleep. And there were no more terrors for the lonely children—at any rate from darkness—for long before their eyes unclosed again the sun had been shining, and was flooding the silent wood with his golden light.

"Oh, where are we?" cried Hetty, who had been lying dreamily watching the play of light and shadow, and trying to make out why the nursery walls looked like trees swaying to and fro.

Letty started up at the sound of this cry, and stared all round her in great astonishment. Then she suddenly exclaimed,—

"Why, we're running away; and we've had our first night out in a wood! Don't you remember, Hetty? Oh, and what a beautiful morning it is! Let's get up and have breakfast. We've got lots of biscuits, and we'll find some water; and then we'll have a bath."

Hetty felt very queer when she got up in all her clothes, and shook the leaves out of them and her hair. Letty was trying to feel comfortable in hers, but it was very odd; and they looked at each other, wondering if each felt as untidy and dirty as the other.

They had been brought up in dainty, refined little ways, and it felt very uncomfortable to be so dishevelled and tousled.

They were hungry, however, and even the hard biscuit was welcome after it had been soaked in the water of a little running brook which they presently found.

Hetty could not make up her mind to take off her clothes in the open air and have a bath; but they did take off their frocks and blouses, and their shoes and stockings, and paddled a little while in the pebbly pool, dabbling their hands and faces too, and trying to get their clothes comfortable and smooth.

They felt a little more like themselves after this; but Hetty was still much too tired to start upon another long tramp. The energy with which she had awakened soon passed off, and she began to cry and beg that they might go home.

"I don't want to be a stowaway," she cried; "I don't like running away. I want to go home, Letty. If you mean to go on running away, I think—I think—you'll have to go alone!" and here Hetty broke down utterly, for the idea of separation from her twin was like the end of all things.

Letty had by this time come to the conclusion that running away wasn't so nice as it sounded in books, and she longed to be at home almost as much as Hetty could.

"There'll be a stepmother coming," she remarked

doubtfully; but Hetty sobbed out that she didn't care for twenty stepmothers, if she could only go home to Betty and nurse.

"Very well, then, we'll go!" cried Letty heroically; "but we must get out of the wood first, and then find our way."

And when they started off hand in hand, Hetty's tears quickly drying with the comforting prospect of going home, they found that, although it had been easy enough to get into the wood, it was anything but an easy matter to find the way out.

"I believe we're lost!" cried Hetty at last, flinging herself down and crying as though her heart would break.

"Don't do that," said Letty, trying to speak more bravely than she felt; "we must get to an end some time."

"We've been going on for hours and hours," sobbed Hetty, "and we don't seem any nearer the end."

That was true enough. The children had been wandering round and round amid the confusion of little paths. It really was not a very large wood, but it was thick, and they had never chanced upon the wide path which would have taken them out. They kept losing themselves in a maze of smaller tracks.

Even Letty was almost worn out by this time, both in mind and body. Her legs ached as they had never done in her life before, and the effort

to uphold Hetty's failing courage was a severe strain upon her.

At last Hetty looked up and said suddenly,—

"I believe we're lost because we're wicked. I believe it was wicked to run away. And we didn't say our prayers last night, because we were too tired; and this morning we forgot, because everything was so different. I know it's wicked not to say our prayers, and wicked people always have bad things happen to them."

"Well, then," cried Letty, who was nothing if not practical, "let us say our prayers now. We'll say double prayers to make up, and then we'll try again."

Hetty wiped away her tears and knelt down beside Letty.

"Let's ask God to show us the way out of the wood," she said.

CHAPTER XI.

A CONTRITE COUPLE.

NO alarm had been raised about Letty and Hetty till quite late in the evening. Nurse knew that they were not coming back to tea, therefore she was in no anxiety at their remaining out for many hours. She knew that Letty was in one of her wild moods, when a good spell of liberty and independence seemed the best thing for her; and it was not until the other pair returned from their party, and the daylight began to fade, that she felt any sort of misgiving about them.

"I wish you would go and call them in, Miss Betty, my dear," she said; "I can't get in among all those bushes myself. I'll just take off your party-frock and put on your blouse, and then you can run and fetch them."

Betty ran to the ruin without any misgiving. She called as she ran, but received no answer. They were evidently gone to the Lady's Bower; and sure enough, when she reached that place, there were the milk-jug and the mug they had taken out with

them, but of the children themselves there was no sign.

Betty was not disturbed just at first. There were several nooks and crannies to be explored; but in none of them could she find a trace of the missing pair. Once she heard footsteps; but when she called out, it was Caspar's voice that answered. Caspar had run out for a book that had been left here, and he gladly joined in the search for the missing children. Betty thought that perhaps they were hiding and dodging her; for Letty was very clever at that sort of thing, and their games in the ruin had given them a dozen ways of slipping silently about. But they could not possibly dodge both her and Caspar for long, and soon it became only too evident to both searchers that no children were there.

"I don't believe they have been here at all," said Caspar. "Look at the things on the table. They've never been moved, and Jetty's cushions are just as she left them, and Letty always makes such a rumpus when she plays. They came and drank their milk here, but they didn't play about. They must be either in your garden or mine. Perhaps, if Letty wanted to be naughty, she'd play in our garden. I'd better go and look for her, and I'll come and tell you."

Nurse was very much put out when she heard the news; but at first there was no real alarm. Betty said she thought they must have got into the next

garden, and that little Sir Caspar was looking for them there. Of course, since they had met little Sir Caspar at other houses, Betty's remark did not strike nurse as strange. She said it was very kind of the little gentleman; but that if Miss Letty had taken to climbing over walls into other people's places, it was time somebody came to look after her, stepmother or no stepmother.

By which stern saying Betty and Jetty were made aware that nurse was more annoyed with Letty than she had ever been before.

But nothing could be heard of the children, though Caspar hunted high and low. He came himself to tell Betty about it.

"I'm sure they've been in the garden, for I got Bill to help me; and he found a trail, and took me into the wood. But you know it is dry and hot, and he couldn't follow the scent long. I think they must be hiding in the wood, or perhaps they are out on the moor and have lost their way. I told grandmother about it, and she is sending some of the men to look. Don't be frightened; they can't have got very far away. We'll be sure to have them safe back soon."

Nurse was greatly obliged to her ladyship, and full of apologies for the misbehaviour of her charges. But time went on and on, and there was no news of the fugitives. The men who had gone to search came back at last unsuccessful. They could hear

nothing of any children, and they had taken all the tracks across the moor. They had gone as far as it seemed possible that little ladies would extend their walk. It had not occurred to anybody that the naughty little couple had deliberately set themselves to run away.

By nine o'clock nurse was in a terrible fright, and notice had been lodged at the police-station. Caspar came backwards and forwards till bedtime, too excited to think of anything else; and, indeed, nobody thought of anything but the missing children and the possibilities of the situation.

It was not a nice country for children to be wandering in. There were old chalk and gravel pits and deep pools of water, and it was a proverbially difficult country for finding the way—all broken up into little valleys and gullies, and with many woods and stretches of moorland.

Caspar was at last captured by Mrs. Diggles and put to bed; but it was long before he slept, and the first thing he thought of on waking was the lost Letty, and he jumped up, calling out eagerly to know if she had been found.

"No, not a trace of them. Poor Deborah is almost distracted. It's really a very sad thing. They are saying that the little girls must have fallen into a pool or down a pit. If they had been walking anywhere along the roads, they must have been found."

"Letty didn't like roads," remarked Caspar; "she

liked fields and woods. And she's very brave too; I don't think she would be afraid of being lost. She'd go on and on all the same."

Mrs. Diggles forgot to wonder at Caspar's intimate acquaintance with the little girl. She dressed her small charge quickly, and when he had had his breakfast he asked leave to run across to the Lodge and get the latest news.

"You must ask her ladyship first," said Mrs. Diggles; but Lady Adair made no objection.

It was a great comfort to Betty and Jetty to have Caspar to talk to, for they were getting into a sad state about their little sisters. A telegram had been sent to the father; but no answer had yet come. He often moved about without leaving any address, so that they could not be sure that it had even reached him. This added to the feeling of Deborah's responsibility, and she looked quite old and careworn as the hours went by without news.

"Grandmother," said Caspar as he sat at lunch, though with very little appetite for food, "can't we go a drive this afternoon and see if we can't hear something about Letty and Hetty? I feel as though perhaps we might. You are so much cleverer than most people; and I want so much to find them. I don't think they can be dead; do you? Because, you know," and here he lowered his voice, "so many people asked God to take care of them last night. You did, I'm sure, grandmother."

Lady Adair was quite willing to do as Caspar suggested, and to let him choose where they should go. Now Caspar already knew the country round a great deal better than the children who had lived in it all their lives; for he went long drives with his grandmother and with Pat, and walks in the woods, too, when he was in the mood. And several times lately he had asked Ryle to take him out on the pony for walks upon the moor, to get used to the feel of it. He had a sort of idea still that Letty and Hetty had lost themselves on the moor, and he asked to drive to that queer little hamlet hidden away upon it—where, in fact, Letty had got their biscuits.

It was not a good road for a carriage; but coachman made no complaint to-day, for he knew why they had chosen it, and he took his horses carefully along the ruts. Caspar was greatly excited, and could hardly sit still, scanning the moor all the while with eager eyes, and encouraging Bill, who ran beside them, to make dashes hither and thither in search of them.

Caspar insisted in getting down at the hamlet and making personal inquiries at different houses, and he came running back in great excitement to tell Lady Adair that two little girls had bought biscuit at the village shop yesterday evening. At this Lady Adair herself got out and saw the boy; but she could get nothing from him, as he seemed afraid of the grand old lady. But when Caspar talked to him and asked

if he had not sold the biscuit to two little girls in holland smocks who looked very much alike, he said "Iss" in a dull sort of way; and Caspar looked triumphantly at his grandmother.

"He was much more sensible before you came," added the boy, when they were in the carriage again. "I think he was frightened at you. But I am quite sure it was they. O grandmother, where can they have got to now?"

That was the problem. Lady Adair considered a little, and then told the coachman to drive quietly about the immediate vicinity, choosing the lanes rather than the highroad. Along the highroads the lost children were certain to be seen and cared for, but perhaps in the lanes they might not be noticed for a long while, and they might be wandering farther and farther away.

So presently the carriage turned alongside of a dark bit of woodland, and Caspar kept standing up and searching with his eyes, in the hope of seeing something of his lost playmates.

The road was very bad for the carriage, as it was a mere sandy track, and the horses only went slowly. Bill was racing about hither and thither, in search either of rabbits or children—it might be an open question which. Suddenly Caspar heard him give a short, sharp bark—a bark that meant recognition, and was different from the sound he made when he was on the track of his quarry.

"Oh," cried the little boy, starting up, "I believe he has found something!"

The burly figures of coachman and footman on the box-seat hid his view in front; but the footman turned back and said, with more eagerness than generally was permitted to enter his voice,—

"If you please, my lady, there is a little girl in the road, and Bill has jumped up at her, and she has got her arms round his neck."

"It's Letty! it's Letty, I know!" cried Caspar, in wild excitement. "O grandmother dear, do let me get out."

Almost before the door was opened he was out, and tearing along at the top of his speed, he came upon Letty sitting by the roadside, her arms closely clasped round Bill's neck, over whose blunt muzzle she was shedding copious tears.

Caspar never remembered to have seen Letty cry before, and he had certainly never seen her in her wildest play look such a forlorn and dishevelled object.

"O Letty, Letty!" he panted, running up. "Oh, we have been so unhappy about you! Did you get lost? And where is Hetty?"

"In there," sobbed Letty, her fire and pride all gone. "She's so tired she can't walk any more. She's just inside the wood. I said I'd sit by the road and watch for somebody to go by. O Caspar, dear Caspar, please take us home; we are so tired and so hungry."

The tears were rolling down the pale, stained cheeks all the time. Caspar felt quite a thrill of pride that Letty should make this appeal to him.

"That's what we've come to do," he said eagerly. "I'll run and fetch Hetty, and then grandmother will take you home in the carriage. I've got some nice things to eat in a basket; Cookie gave them to me. I was afraid we might find you starving somewhere. She said you wouldn't starve after her basket was open."

Caspar dashed off into the wood in the direction to which Letty pointed, and sure enough he soon heard a faint little call from somewhere close at hand.

"O Caspar, Caspar, dear Caspar! have you come to save us?"

It was Hetty who was hailing him—a white, wretched-looking little morsel of humanity, curled up in a dejected ball at the foot of a big tree.

The child was quite worn out with hunger, fatigue, and fear; but the sight of Caspar revived her like a draught of wine.

He helped her to her feet, and though she was stiff and weak, she could trot along with the help of his hand. A few minutes later they came out into the lane, to find Letty already seated in the carriage opposite Lady Adair, her tears wiped away, talking volubly to the stately old lady—not with her old assurance and bravado, it is true, but with a great deal of eloquence and graphic power.

Hetty looked a little startled at seeing the grand equipage and the unfamiliar face of Lady Adair, but she was too worn out to be afraid of anything save the solitude of the lonely moors and woods.

"You poor little mite, come and tell me all about it!" spoke Lady Adair, in a sudden access of pity at the sight of Hetty's white, wan face.

The kind tone brought the tears in a rush to Hetty's eyes, and in a minute she was sobbing her heart out leaning against Lady Adair's breast.

Caspar was eagerly opening his basket, and Letty's eyes sparkled at the sight of the delicate dainties within.

"O Hetty, Hetty, look!" she cried; "look what Caspar has brought for us!—It's so funny," she added, with her mouth full: "Hetty was so hungry, but she couldn't eat our biscuits. I shall keep them for dear Bill. He will like them; but they didn't taste a bit nice to us."

Cookie had used discrimination in her choice of food for the little lost children in case they should be found, and the thin, delicate sandwiches and slices of chicken and tongue soon brought the colour back into the wan little faces.

Caspar drew out a flask that contained one of Cookie's great delicacies—some elderberry wine of her own brewing, and of which she was not a little proud. A drink of this did much to revive the little wanderers, and although they were sadly dishevelled

in appearance, they no longer looked the pitiful objects they had appeared half an hour before.

The carriage, meantime, was slowly proceeding down the rutty lane; for there was not room enough to turn it, and they had to make a round to get back to a main road.

"My dears," said Lady Adair, when the children had eaten and drunk, "how did you come to get lost for so long?"

Letty hung her head, for once in her life abashed and silent; it was Hetty who answered,—

"We didn't exactly get lost at first; we were running away."

"Running away from what, my dear?"

"Running away from home," answered Hetty, "because of the stepmother, you know—and—and other things."

Lady Adair's face expressed something like astonishment. She had not heard about any stepmother at the Lodge. Caspar was listening with wide-open eyes.

"A stepmother!" he exclaimed; "how?"

"Father wrote to nurse," broke in Letty, "and she told us we were going to have a new mamma; but I knew she would be a stepmother. We were thinking of running away before that, and when we heard of the stepmother we were quite sure we would."

"Why were you going to run away?"

Letty's face grew very red. She had not the bold

assurance of manner that Caspar was used to seeing in her.

"It was so dull," she said; "we had played all the games, and they kept telling me I was naughty. I thought we'd run away and be stowaways, and get to a desert island somehow.—You know you were always saying how nice desert islands were, Caspar, and it says so in all the books."

"But, my dear children," said Lady Adair, "surely you knew you would be caught and brought back long before you could reach the sea. Besides, you are little girls, not little boys; and you are old enough to know that running away and giving your friends so much anxiety and trouble is very naughty."

Letty hung her head. She had had time to think of a great many things during the hours of this long day, when they had believed themselves hopelessly lost twenty miles or more from home. She attempted no sort of justification; and it was Hetty who answered timidly,—

"But Letty said the stepmother would beat us, and roast us in the oven, and shut us up in cages to make us fat for eating. It seemed better to run away and be stowaways than that; and they wouldn't find us till after the ship started."

Caspar's eyes were wide with a sort of admiring curiosity.

"Were you really, really going to hide on a ship?" he asked.

Letty nodded, though she still looked red and uncomfortable; and it was Hetty who added in the same eager way,—

"We were going to find a drunken captain, and a very, very old ship which was sure to be wrecked—" and then Hetty stopped suddenly, for she saw that Letty was growing more and more ashamed.

In fact, Letty was really shrewd and clever enough to know that the things she had said to help to persuade Hetty (who believed in her twin most fervently) sounded very silly and ridiculous when repeated to grown-up folks. Lady Adair's clear glance was fixed upon the face of the little runaway opposite, and she said in very quiet tones,—

"My dear, Letty was talking great nonsense; and I think she knew it herself, whether you did or not. You have done very wrong, but I hope you have learned a lesson which will prevent you from ever doing it again."

The tears started again to Hetty's eyes.

"I shall never want to run away any more!" she said.

Just at this moment the carriage turned into the highroad, and the beat of the horses' feet and the sound of the wheels made noise enough to cover the voices of Letty and Caspar as they turned to each other. It was Letty who began.

"I shan't ever want to run away either," she admitted, and this from Letty was a decided con-

cession; "and when I grow big I shall write a book about it, and tell people that they mustn't give their children silly books about its being all so nice. It wasn't nice at all, not just after the first little bit. It isn't nice sleeping in a wood. It's horrid not having a bath and a night-gown and a bed. And biscuit isn't nice either—not for all your meals. And when the other one cries and asks to go home, and you've lost your way, it's very horrid. I don't want ever to read about stowaways again. I believe they're all lies."

"They ought to be boys, you know," said Caspar, with a little diffidence, for he was afraid of receiving a snub from Letty; "I never heard of a little girl being one."

Letty sighed. She had always regretted not being a boy, but to-day it did not seem to matter so much. She did not think running away would have been very nice even if she had been one.

"Caspar," she said, leaning towards him, her face growing very red, "I want to whisper."

He approached his head very close to hers.

"Caspar," she said, "I'm not ever going to be nasty to you again, or call you a coward caitiff minion. I'll tell you why. I was frightened myself several times yesterday and to-day. It is a horrid feeling; but when you are frightened you can't help it!"

Caspar looked exceedingly gratified and grateful.

"Oh, but, Letty, you are much braver than me. You weren't afraid of the pony."

"Well, but I've been afraid now; though I shouldn't like anybody to call me a coward. I'm not going to be nasty to you any more. I know I have been. I thought about it when we thought we should never get home. I was sorry then. I was afraid you would be glad I had gone away."

"Oh no, no, Letty; we were all in a great way! I've been hunting for you ever since, and so has Bill."

"Well, that shows you are a very noble knight," said Letty. "I know I thought you looked very like a knight coming to the rescue when I saw you coming to me in the wood."

Caspar's face flushed with pleasure. This from Letty was a great compliment.

"We might play at knights and rescues," continued Letty, putting aside her contrition and humiliation now that the confession was made, but taking none of her autocratic airs upon her. "I never cared to be a lady in distress before, but I shan't mind so much now that I know the feeling. I thought they were all such ninnies before, but now I don't think they are."

"You would never be a ninny!" cried Caspar, with eager enthusiasm; "but I should like to play at being your true knight and rescuing you out of the forest."

"Would you really?" asked Letty, admiring the forgiving spirit of her knight instead of despising it.

"I should indeed, if you will let me."

"Well, I will," answered Letty, in her most gracious tone. "And, Caspar, you will forget how cross we have been, and you will come and play in the Lady's Bower again?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BRAVE ONE.

THE little wanderers were welcomed back with open arms, and with tears of joy. Nurse was so unspeakably relieved that she could not even scold the weary, dishevelled little girls who had caused all this anxiety and perturbation.

The father took no notice of the escapade, for he got the two telegrams announcing the loss and the return of the children at the same time. His mind was presumably so filled with other matters that this one soon passed from his mind.

But there was the less need for scolding and punishment from the fact that Letty was more thoroughly humbled than she had ever been in all her life before. She did not say much; but all saw the change in her, and nurse rejoiced that the little independent, peril-loving girl had learned a lesson at last.

For Letty had all her life long been quite certain that if she could only be a free agent and do as she liked, she could achieve wonderful things for herself.

It was the tiresome grown-up people who were always in the way, whose rules spoiled everything, who prevented fun and adventure, and made life dull and stupid for everybody.

This had been Letty's growing conviction from babyhood, fed and fostered by the motley array of romances they had been permitted to read (for the one way in which their father noticed them was to send them off batches of story-books from time to time, not chosen, perhaps, with the greatest of discrimination), and by the dramatic games she had been always inventing and playing. She had continually been vainly longing for an opportunity to prove her theory; and at last the chance had come, when she persuaded Hetty to run away with her.

And then Letty had found, as little people always do find when they make these audacious experiments, that she did not know in the very least what to do with their liberty when they had it!

They had lost their way hopelessly only three miles away from home; they had found themselves helpless, miserable, terrified; and had been thankful to be carried home in Lady Adair's carriage within twenty-four hours of their triumphant start!

Not only had the attempt been a ridiculous failure (how ridiculous Letty was far more keenly conscious than any of her companions), but Letty did not see how they could have done differently if they had the chance over again. It was not as though they had

been pursued and caught before they had fairly got away. They had had a whole night in which to make good their escape; but instead of doing it, they had been so tired they had slept till daylight; and instead of thriving upon a diet of biscuits and water, and finding fruit and roots in the forests as all runaways did, they had felt wretched and half starved, and had mingled their tears together, only longing and praying that they might be found and taken home.

Letty did not say all this in words even to Hetty, but she knew it all in her heart, and it taught her more than any lecture from nurse or father could have done. She was more humbled by their silence than she would have been by reproaches. She began to think that it was a nice thing (instead of a dull one) to have a pleasant home, and kind friends to care for her. So she was merry and contented instead of snappish and disagreeable, and she no longer tossed her head and looked like an angry little lion when Betty suggested that they should all try to be very good, in case Miss Grimshawe should hear about them and feel she must come back. She had begun to think that after all perhaps Betty was wiser than herself, for Betty would certainly have told her beforehand that it would be foolish to run away; and certainly it had proved to be so, though nothing but experience would have convinced Letty of it.

Also it had been a salutary lesson for Letty to learn what fear was like. She had had an idea that nothing would ever make *her* afraid, and that it would be as easy to show courage upon real occasion as in the games she was so fond of playing.

But this had not proved to be the case. Letty had grown very frightened indeed during her wanderings through the wood, not knowing where to turn for aid. It was in this time of fear and wretchedness that Caspar and Bill had appeared, rather like two guardian angels, as she said in her own thoughts; and she had then and there resolved that she would never sneer and flout Caspar again, or call him a coward, and to this resolve she loyally adhered.

What chiefly puzzled the grown-up people in both houses at this time was the fact that the children did not make any request to be allowed to "know one another."

Nurse had felt convinced that after little Sir Caspar's kind and neighbourly interest in the lost couple the little girls would certainly entreat to be allowed to ask him to their nursery or garden, and she had racked her brains to know what to say if they did.

Lady Adair, on her side, had equally expected that Caspar would proffer a like request, and she was a little doubtful as to the best manner of answering him, for she was not fond of talking to children of unneighbourly disputes; and yet she was fully aware

of the difficulty of seeming to seek reconciliation with an unfriendly neighbour by making advances in his absence to his children.

However, to the surprise and relief of all, the children never suggested any such thing. Of course they really met constantly in the Lady's Bower, in the enjoyment of that secret which Caspar indulged in with a perfectly easy conscience, and the little girls with only very slight misgivings, and those all on Betty's part. The only advance that Caspar ever asked his grandmother to make was to take Jetty home on Sundays in the carriage, when she appeared at church.

"That little girl is not strong like the rest; it tires her to walk," he said upon the Sunday following the escapade which had brought the two families a step nearer together. "Will you take her and let me walk?"

"There is plenty of room for you both in the carriage," said Lady Adair. "You can go and ask her if she would like to drive; we will take her if she would."

So that, wonderful to say, Betty actually had her wish, and Jetty was driven regularly home in Lady Adair's grand carriage! Lady Adair, in fact, became something of an object of admiration and adoration to the little girls at the Lodge. If she noticed them with a smile or a nod when they met on the roads, they would colour with pleasure; and Letty even

tried to drop a "court courtesy" to her as she went by, fancying, like Caspar, that she stood almost in the place of the queen of the village.

Letty and Caspar were fast friends again now. She kept her promise loyally; and, indeed, she never felt inclined to jeer at him, for she knew the feeling of fear now, and how horrid a thing it was.

She was quite willing now to play at being a "distressed damsel," lost, or tied to a tree in a forest; and for Caspar to be a "noble knight," who came to her rescue, and whose "lady-love" she afterwards became.

They were very happy together during the closing days of this long, bright summer, spending their time almost entirely in the Lady's Bower, and making the most of the golden September days which they knew could not last for ever.

And with October a change was to come to all. The father was to bring home the dreaded stepmother early that month; and although Letty had ceased to prognosticate the horrors with which she had scared Hetty during the first days after this thing had been told them, they all looked forward with some dread to an event which might entirely change the current of their lives and bring a new ruler inside the walls of their home. Then Caspar was to begin regular lessons with a tutor, who would stay in the village, and come every day to the Hall. He did not think his grandmother had found anybody yet to suit her,

but he knew that his days of liberty were numbered.

"I wish we could do lessons together," Letty had said many times; "it would be so much more fun. But then I suppose we should lose the deadly feud and the deadly secret; and we should not like that."

"I should like there to be no feud," Caspar said, "and no secret either. I should like us to be friends and neighbours, just running in and out as we liked to each other's houses. That's what I should like best; but I don't know if we shall ever be like that —unless your stepmother and my grandmother make friends!"

"Oh," cried Letty, struck by an entirely new idea, "I wonder if that would ever happen! I think it would be rather interesting if it did!"

But little as the children knew it, something was to happen even before the arrival of the stepmother which put quite a new face upon the state of affairs between the two houses, and took for ever from off Caspar's shoulders the stigma of being a coward.

The children talked a good deal in those days about what constituted bravery, and whether brave men could ever feel afraid, and whether knowing the feeling of fear made one really a coward. Caspar was still exercised in his mind as to whether he should ever be brave enough to serve the Queen as he wanted to do, and as his father had done before him; and he told Letty one day that his grandmother had

promised to write to a friend of hers who was one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, and ask her what she thought about it.

Letty thought this was very interesting, and wondered whether, if Caspar were some day to be one of the Queen's knights, she might perhaps be one of her ladies-in-waiting. That would be quite romantic, she thought; and Caspar thought it would be a capital arrangement.

"Because I shall marry you when I get big," he said; "and then when I go and fight the Queen's battles, you will stay at court with her till I come back. The Queen will take care of you, and I shall be happy about you, because I shall know you will be safe. Grandmother says that her friend has told her that the Queen is the kindest lady in the world. Everybody who knows her loves her. She never forgets anybody, and she thinks of everybody. I'll tell you something grandmother told me about her. It was when the Prince of Wales was so ill; they thought he would die. The Queen was there at Sandringham; and there was a stable-boy ill too of the same disease. He had rooms right away somewhere over the stables, you know; but every day the Queen went to see him her own self. She never forgot to go, though she was so anxious and often so tired. That's what I call being a real queen. I think she is the best queen there has ever been in all the world. Grandmother tells me stories about

her almost every day. I like them the best of all her stories. Oh, I do hope she will let me be her knight when I grow up. I don't think I could feel afraid of anything if I were doing it for her!"

It was upon a hot, bright day late in September that the children were talking like this. Jetty, who happened not to be very well that day, and had passed a bad night with an ache in her back, was lying half asleep upon her couch, although of late she had not used it so much. The others were sitting at the other side of the octagonal chamber, enjoying the sunshine which poured in upon them there: for, as has been said, there was only a little bit of roof, and that was over Jetty's head; the rest of it had fallen in long ago.

All in a moment there came a strange low, rumbling sound, and the ground seemed to tremble beneath their feet.

"An earthquake! an earthquake!" shrieked Letty, jumping up in a sort of ecstasy of mingled terror and delighted excitement. But the next moment she uttered a different sort of shriek, and pointed wildly towards the wall.

"Look, look! it's falling, it's falling! It'll kill Jetty! Oh! oh! oh!"

The ground was rocking and quaking in a terrible way; there was a sullen booming like thunder in the air. Jetty, who had been sleeping till awakened by Letty's cry, had hardly got her eyes open, and her

senses were far away. She thought Letty was only playing a game, and wished she would not make quite so much noise. But the rest saw. Betty sat frozen and transfixed with horror, whilst the blood ebbed away from Hetty's cheeks, leaving her as white and nerveless as a little ghost; and Letty could only scream and point, feeling as though she had suddenly turned into a block of stone.

For the wall over Jetty's head and the bit of groined roof still remaining were curving bodily over, about to fall and crush the hapless little creature beneath.

Caspar saw and understood in the same moment; and he took in two things—first, that there was no time to get Jetty clear away before the stones came crashing down; and secondly, that she was really safer immediately beneath the wall itself than a little farther out, where the loose stones would fall most heavily.

In the twinkling of an eye he had caught up a heavy rug—a moth-eaten old bearskin which they had spread upon the floor. At ordinary times it was as much as he could do to lift it, but in moments of extreme excitement it is wonderful how much power we find in our muscles. He snatched it up and flung it bodily over Jetty, and then sprang upon her himself, covering her with his own body, and exposing himself to the force of the shower of stones, careless of his own safety if he could only save her from danger.

"Pat lifted a little crushed and senseless form in his arms."

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He had no time to think about it. It was instinct rather than reason which prompted the move—the instinct of his race, which had been noted for its brave men and chivalrous sons for many long generations.

The next moment down came the crumbling walls and roof. The place was filled with choking dust; fragments flew all about. The little girls felt as though they would be crushed and stifled, and a little cry broke from Hetty as a sharp fragment struck her on the shoulder. Letty's shrieks were ringing through the air—shrieks for help from somewhere, she knew not and cared not whence, if only somebody would come to them.

The shaking of the ground had ceased now. The thick cloud of dust was settling down again. Bill could be seen digging frantically at the heap of fallen masonry beneath which were entombed two childish forms.

Betty, as white as death, held Hetty in her arms, who was shaking from head to foot; and it was Letty's shrieks which were bringing hurrying footsteps towards the spot.

"What is it? Who's there? Sir Caspar, are you hurt?" cried a man's voice somewhere close behind the wall.

"He's killed!" shrieked Letty. "The wall fell on Jetty, and he threw himself over her to save her. He's dead. They're both dead. I think we're all

dead. Do come and help us out; the earthquake may come back again."

The next moment a man's head appeared at the top of the wall which was still standing. Letty gave a little cry of recognition, for she knew it was Pat. She had seen him out with Caspar many times before now.

"Preserve us! but what have we got here?" he cried, in genuine astonishment. "Little lady, how came you here? And where is Sir Caspar?"

"He's under there," cried Letty, pointing, "where Bill is digging. He's been killed, and Jetty too!" and she broke into a storm of sobs, and sank down, rocking herself to and fro.

It was no time to ask questions; these must wait till another opportunity. Pat raised a mighty cry which brought men hurrying from all parts of the grounds, and in a moment he was tugging at the stones, and lifting them off one by one, in an agony of apprehension. Ryle was next to appear, and he assisted Pat in the moving of the stones, whilst another messenger hurried back to the house with white face and anxious eyes.

"Steady now, every mother's son of ye!" cried Pat suddenly. "We're getting to them now. This is Sir Caspar. Be gentle now; be careful. It's meself as'll never believe he's dead till I hear him say so himself. Steady, steady there!"

The children stood with bated breath, white-faced,

terrified, and stricken. Next minute Pat had lifted a little crushed and senseless form in his arms; whilst Ryle lifted up the bearskin underneath, and there lay Jetty, looking pale but tranquil, as though she slept, and without a bruise or a scratch.

"The little master's took the brunt of it," he said, with a choke in his voice. "The little lady's only stunned and choked. She's breathing beautiful."

At that word Betty sprang forward, and flung herself down beside Jetty, calling her name aloud. And the next moment a sudden silence amongst the men made her look up, to see Lady Adair standing pale and erect in their midst.

"What is all this?" she asked.

Pat stood back, hiding his burden a little from the eyes of the mistress, who did not for a moment realize the magnitude of the danger to which Caspar had been exposed, and was more astonished at the confusion about her, and the presence of these children from the Lodge, than alive to the nature of the accident, although she had hastened out upon hearing that something had happened, and that her grandson had somehow been concerned in it.

Letty found her tongue first, and began an excited explanation, in the midst of which Lady Adair's eyes turned upon Pat and his charge, and she uttered a quick, inarticulate sound.

"He's not dead, my lady," said Pat quickly. "It's meself that can feel the beat of his heart. I'll carry

him up to the house as quick as may be, and send for the doctor. There never was an Adair yet as didn't fight for his life like a true-born Britisher. He'll weather it through, ye'll see, my lady."

Lady Adair looked at Ryle, who was standing a little back.

"Carry that other little girl to the Lodge," she said.—"My dears," she added to the other children, "you had better all go home now. I should like to understand all this better some day, but I must see to Caspar now."

Letty suddenly slipped her hand into Lady Adair's.

"Please take me with you; I want to know about Caspar too, and I can explain it all. Betty and Hetty will go with Jetty. I don't think she's hurt much. Caspar saved her. Caspar is a hero."

Lady Adair's fingers closed over Letty's small hand, and they went out together by the passage which Letty had thought their own secret all this time.

In spite of her anxiety about Caspar, Lady Adair could not but listen in some amaze to the rather confused and yet graphic story of secret friendship which Letty poured into her ears. She remembered her acquiescence in Caspar's garden secret, which he was sure his father and mother would approve. A slight smile quivered from time to time over her lips, and once she stooped and kissed Letty, who exclaimed in some amaze,—

"Then you're not angry? and you don't mind its

not being a deadly feud any longer? Caspar said he should like to be proper friends now, and I think it would be rather nice, though I liked the secret at first best."

"I always like little children to be friends," answered Lady Adair quietly. "I will write to-night to your father, my dear. If he has no objection, you and Caspar can continue to be friends, if—"

A sudden spasm of pain passed over Lady Adair's face, and she unconsciously hastened her steps.

"If the earthquake hasn't killed him, you mean," finished Letty, with her usual quickness of comprehension. "O Lady Adair, I think God would take care of him, because he was trying to save Jetty—and risking his own life. That is being a hero, isn't it—a real hero?"

"It was not an earthquake, my dear," said Lady Adair; "it was an explosion at the gas-works over yonder. A good deal of glass must have been broken in the village. It has happened before, and then part of the ruin fell in. If I had known that Caspar was playing there so much, I should have sent to see to the state of the walls. They have not been very safe for some time. Now, my dear, I think you had better run home. I will send word how Caspar is when Mr. Coburne has been. He must see Jetty when he has seen Caspar."

Letty would have liked to stay and hear the doctor's report; but she was learning a higher standard of

obedience, and so she only lifted her face for a good-bye kiss.

"You're not angry with us then?"

"No, my dear, I am not angry. Caspar asked my leave to have a secret. You none of you intended any harm."

"No," answered Letty frankly; "but I think the others would have told at first if I hadn't begged them not. I wanted it to be a secret. It seemed more romantic."

And then Lady Adair gave her a pat on the hand, and sent her back home through the garden way, whilst she herself, with an anxious face, went towards the house, into which Pat had already vanished with his light burden.

Letty went home, but she did not go upstairs even to ask for Jetty's welfare; she was so anxious about Caspar. She hung round the door till, after what seemed a very long time, she saw Mr. Coburne's tall figure approaching; whereupon she darted forward in great haste.

"Tell me about Caspar!" she cried.

The doctor's face was rather grave, she noticed, although he gave her a smile and held out a friendly hand.

"Caspar has got some very bad knocks and cuts and bruises," he said, "and one of his arms is broken."

"But he won't die?" was the breathless question.

"I hope not," was the quiet answer. "But he will

have to be kept very quiet for a long time. His head is hurt, and he has been crushed a good deal—I cannot quite tell how much yet. They tell me that you saw everything. Will you by-and-by take me to the place, and show me just what happened?"

Letty promised eagerly; but Jetty had first to be visited. Mr. Coburne, however, was not long with her, and came down with a much less grave face.

"Not much the matter there," he said. "A few bruises—just enough to keep her in bed for a few days; and you must try to be quiet for a little while, and not talk about the accident before her. But very soon she will be quite well, so you need not be at all unhappy. And now come and show me the place, and the stones that fell on Caspar, and I shall perhaps be able to judge better about him."

Letty eagerly complied, Hetty creeping timidly beside them, holding her twin's hand.

Mr. Coburne made a careful examination of the place, and was assured by the observant Letty that the heaviest stones had not fallen upon Caspar, nor had the roof come directly down upon him. The wall had seemed to bow over and crumble down just where they were, and the heaviest stones fell clear of them. Mr. Coburne's face lightened a little as he heard this.

"Well, we must hope for the best. Little people are very elastic, and stand a good deal. But don't play here any more for the present, children. After

such a shaking the walls may not be safe for some little while."

He went away, and the twins took hands again; but when they were clear of the ruins, Letty suddenly plumped down upon her knees in the shrubbery, and said,—

"When we were in the wood and asked God to let us find the way home, He sent Caspar and Bill to find us. I'm going to ask Him to make Caspar well. I believe He'll do it if we all ask every day."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STEPMOTHER.

FOUR little girls dressed in new white frocks, their hair neatly brushed, their faces full of a breathless expectation, stood hand in hand in the hall of Falconer's Lodge, awaiting the arrival of their father with the "new mamma."

It was the first time that Jetty had come downstairs since the accident of the falling wall. She looked white and frail, and held Betty's hand very closely clasped in hers; but she would not be denied her share in the welcoming of the parents home, and Mr. Coburne had assented to her petition to be allowed to go downstairs for that occasion.

She and Betty had blue sashes and blue bows on their frocks, whilst Letty's and Hetty's ribbons were of crimson hue. Letty's cheeks were almost as bright as her sash. She was shivering with excitement, and kept making little dashes towards the door, to find out if she could hear the rumble of wheels by just opening it a little bit, though a word from Betty

would bring her rushing back to her place at the end of the line.

"Will she be nice? Will she be kind to us? Will she be a new mamma, or only just a stepmother?"—these were the questions that were agitating the children's minds, and had been for some time. They knew so little; their father's letters told so little. He had given orders about having things done in the house, and he had ordered new frocks for the children. But he had not appeared himself; he had not brought the children up to witness the marriage, or to be introduced to their new mother. Everything seemed to them dim and mysterious; and when at last the sound of approaching wheels was heard upon the gravel sweep, they unconsciously nipped each other hard by the hand, and the colour came and went in all the little faces, whilst their breath seemed to be drawn with difficulty.

The servants were coming hastily forward. A solemn-looking butler had arrived two days before, and other servants whom the children had never seen. But there was Nurse Deborah in the background, beaming encouragement upon them; and Letty set her teeth and resolved to go through with it as bravely as possible, even to kissing the new mamma and trying to look pleased, as nurse had bidden them, which the Letty of a few weeks back would certainly have refused to do.

The door stood wide open; the carriage with its

gleaming lights was dashing up. Out in the chill darkness without the breath of the horses looked like smoke, and gave to Letty a delightful thrill of wondering expectancy. Surely that was the way in which fairy godmothers arrived!

The next minute two figures had entered the hall. Their father was one, and he was leading by the hand a tall, elegant lady, clad from head to foot in a great fur-lined cloak. She had on her head a large, plumed hat—just like one of Letty's favourite Cavalier ladies; and the moment that she saw the four little white figures standing upon the rug by the great fire, she flung off her heavy cloak, which fell in a heap at her feet, and stepped forward—a beautiful, radiant vision, all soft grey and shining silver—just like a fairy godmother; and advancing swiftly upon the little quivering group, she knelt suddenly down and gathered them into her arms all together.

"Darlings," she said, in a clear, rich voice, which sounded to them all like some beautiful music, "I am your new mamma. Will you try to love me a little, and be my own dear little girls?"

Jetty was clinging to her in a moment, and Hetty nestled up into her arms as though it were a right and proper resting-place. Betty's kiss was full of eager gratitude, and Letty's little hands were employed in caressing the soft grey fur round the lady's throat.

For a moment the little group remained almost motionless, though there was the sound of the exchange

of kisses, till a voice over their heads suddenly broke the silence by saying,—

"And is mamma to get all the kisses? Are there none left for papa?"

The children hardly knew the voice; and now that they looked up at the tall gentleman smiling down at them, they almost felt as though they had got a new papa as well as a new mamma. It was the same face, to be sure, and yet it was so changed: the gloomy look had gone from the eyes; the smile was quite different, and so much kinder. The children lifted shy faces, but they lifted them willingly, and it somehow seemed as though the father's kisses were kinder and sweeter than they had ever been.

Meantime the beautiful lady was speaking some kind words to the servants in general, and to Nurse Deborah in particular; and then turning back to the children, she held out both her hands and said,—

"Now, darlings, suppose you show me which is my room, and then I must learn which name belongs to each little girl. I think I know which is Jetty—the poor little pale face shows me that. But we are not going to allow any more pale faces and bad backs any more, are we? What is the use of a new mamma if she cannot put those troublesome things to rights?"

Jetty had taken the hand stretched out, and now laid her cheek caressingly against it. Letty had seized the other, and Betty led the way upstairs, with Hetty for her companion.

They all knew which room had been specially got ready for the new mistress; and it had been made so beautiful that the little girl threw open the door with some pride.

"Isn't it pretty, mamma?" she asked; and the new name which she thought it would be so hard to say came so easily that she found herself smiling, and her reward was a very sweet kiss.

"I don't believe she is a stepmother at all!" cried Letty, in her sudden way, and speaking in trenchant tones of subdued excitement; "she's a fairy godmother, and everything will be lovely now, and we shall all love her with all our hearts!"

"Were you afraid of a cruel, wicked stepmother, darlings?" asked the lady, with a gleam of laughter in her pretty eyes.

Letty saw the laughing look, and answered it by one of her own arch glances through her long lashes.

"We thought at first you would beat us, and perhaps kill us; and that's why Hetty and I ran away. Did father tell you about that? We ran away and got lost; but Caspar found us next day. We've tried to be good since that."

"You must tell me all about it, darlings, when we have more time. I want to know all about my little girls.—Ah! and here comes papa, and here are my boxes. I must get ready for dinner now; but you must all come down to dessert and tell us the story. We shall want to know everything our little girls

have been doing, and we have not heard half from letters—letters tell so little."

The children went away in a state of bewildered happiness. They knew that Caspar went in to dessert with Lady Adair every night, but such a privilege had never been accorded to them before when their father had been at home on flying visits.

Jetty could not be persuaded to go to bed, even though nurse declared she would be very tired if she sat up; she was so eager to see the new mamma again, to receive one of her sweet smiles, and to hear the tones of her kind voice.

So nurse brushed them up again and tied their sashes afresh, and the solemn butler opened the door for them, and they went in hand-in-hand in pairs.

The big dining-room was rather dim, except where softly-shaded lamps threw circles of light upon the snowy cloth and the sparkling silver and glass, the beautiful fruit and dainty sweetmeats. Four chairs had been set for them—two on each side of the table; and at the head sat the beautiful lady, looking more like a fairy than ever in her gleaming white robes, with pearls round her throat, and her arms bare to the elbow. They could see now that her hair was like threads of shining gold, and that her eyes were the colour of violets. Letty had never seen anybody so beautiful before—had never even imagined that anybody could be so beautiful—and her eyes could scarcely look at anything else.

But the lady was not going to have them sit like little mice in her presence. She began to ask them questions about themselves, about their games, even about that running away to which Letty had alluded a little while before. So Letty had to tell the story, which she did, rather shyly at first, but gathering confidence as she went on; and both papa and mamma, instead of scolding, laughed so heartily at the recital that it was easy to get through the tale, even though it always did make Letty feel rather small to think how she had failed in her plans.

Then mamma wanted to know all about Caspar, and Letty at once plunged into that story; though Betty sat quaking in fear of their father's anger, for she had an idea that he would be very vexed at their making the acquaintance of the boy next door.

Once she stole a timid glance at his face, but it did not look at all stern or angry. Indeed, now that Betty could take a good look at it unobserved, she could not help thinking that it was a very different face from what she had always thought her father's to be. He was listening to Letty's story with a little smile upon his lips, and now and again he spoke a quick, low word to his wife across the table in the way that grown-up people do, as if to explain something to her, receiving a bright, flashing smile back in response.

"I think that papa and mamma love each other very much," said Betty to herself, and a feeling stole

over her that it was a happy thing to belong to a household where love was the ruling power. It had been the lack of love which had shadowed the children's lives since the loss of their own mother. If the new mamma was going to bring it back to them, how happy they would be!

Letty had got to the story of the "earthquake," as she liked to call it, although they knew it was really an explosion, and had been taken to see the damage done to some houses which stood nearer. All her hearers listened with interest to the recital, for Letty could tell a story graphically; and although Mr. Tyrrel and his wife had heard by letter of the occurrence, they had not quite realized how imminent had been the danger to which the children had been exposed.

"And little Caspar—how is he?" asked the lady, as soon as the tale was done. But Letty looked grave, and the tears came into Jetty's eyes.

"We haven't seen him since, and we mayn't for a long time, Mr. Coburne says," answered Letty. "He's very ill. He's got something the matter with his head—I think they call it collision on the brain."

"Concussion," corrected Betty softly.

"Well, something like that. It doesn't matter what its name is. But he just lies and doesn't talk or notice things; and they won't let even dear Bill go into his room, lest he should disturb him. Mamma dear, *might* we invite dear Bill to come and stay with

us? He is getting so thin and unhappy, and I think we could make him happy here. He comes and sees us in the garden, and wants to come with us; but nurse says we mustn't have him unless you'll let us—and he is such a dear Bill. I'm sure you'd love him if you were to see him!"

"Well, we will think about it, dear," answered mamma, with her kind smile. "I am very fond of animals; and if papa does not mind, and Lady Adair is willing, I should be pleased to help to make the poor dog happy. But we shall see all about that in a few days."

"Do you know Lady Adair?" asked Letty, with wide-open eyes.

"No, dear, not exactly; but I have brothers who knew something of the Sir Caspar who died in India—your little friend's father; and both papa and I have had occasion to write to her lately about one or two little things. I hope we shall soon know each other quite well, for I think from what I hear that she must be a very nice old lady."

"I think she is—she is a sort of a queen, you know. We sometimes call her the Queen. She is very kind, Caspar says, though she is rather strict too. He has to obey her; but then people always do have to obey the Queen, you know. He does not mind that."

Again Betty stole a glance at her father, and was surprised to see his face still wearing a smiling look.

She remembered how in past days any allusion to Lady Adair would bring a frown into his eyes, and he would often utter some irritable and abusive epithet. But he did not seem a bit angry to-day, and so Betty felt sure that something new and wonderful had come into their lives.

They felt it again next morning, when they were summoned into their new mamma's own special boudoir, to be welcomed by her with sweet smiles and kisses. They had breakfasted in the nursery as usual, almost inclined to wonder whether last night's experiences had not been, after all, a dream. But the sight of the beautiful lady, surrounded by her pretty things in her own room, brought all the glamour of delight back; and after Jetty had been made comfortable upon a little sofa, and Betty had been given a delightful book of pictures to turn over for her, they all knew that the new mamma was no dream, but a very delightful reality.

They had seen this pretty room before, but it looked different now that the owner's hands had been at work upon it—so many pretty little interesting things had been put out, including photographs of people and places, most of which were strange to Hetty and Letty, who went about on tiptoe looking at them.

The one they liked best was the photograph of a little boy seated upon a big horse, with a great hound standing beside him; and when mamma had attention to spare for them, they asked her who it was.

"It is a little nephew of mine," she answered—"a very dear little funny boy, whom they call Squib at home, because he used to have a funny way of 'going off,' as his father called it, and talking very fast and excitedly, and then being quite quiet again. He is very fond of animals, and that is his horse and his dog; but the poor dog was killed by lightning in the summer. Perhaps some day Squib will come and pay me a visit here, and then you will see him."

"That *would* be nice!" cried Letty eagerly.

"Are you fond of animals too, mamma?" asked Hetty; and the lady answered with a bright smile,—

"Yes, very. I have always been accustomed to have them about. We shall have to persuade papa to let us have some pets, shall we not?"

Four eager little faces were turned towards her, and four pairs of eyes gleamed brightly.

"Miss Grimshawe does not like them either," said Betty, with a note of apprehension in her tone.

"Ah! but Miss Grimshawe is not coming back any more," was the quite unexpected reply. "Did you not hear that her mother died, and that she is going to stay with her sister and help in the little school they have had there so many years? They have the promise of a good many pupils, and your Miss Grimshawe, who is a very good teacher, will stay. So she is not coming back any more. Will you miss her very much, darlings?"

The children exchanged wondering glances. Life without Miss Grimshawe for governess seemed such a strange thing. Then Letty found her tongue, and answered,—

"I think we shall like it. We weren't very fond of her. She made all the days alike, and wouldn't let us play in the garden, and was always saying, 'Don't, don't, don't,' all day long. Once I was very angry with her"—and Letty's voice sank to a whisper. "I rather wanted to poison her; but Betty said we mustn't."

Mamma's face strove to be grave, but there was a dancing light in her eyes, and Letty felt that she loved her better and better every moment.

"Well, darlings, we must try not to think unkind and naughty thoughts about the people we do not quite like, for they often teach us a great many useful lessons we might never learn without them. Perhaps, when you come to do lessons with me, you will be angry with me too. But please don't poison me, Letty, for I should not like that at all!"

They came crowding round her in amaze and bewilderment.

"Are you going to give us our lessons?"

"Just for a little while—till we can get something settled. You have had such a long holiday now that we must begin again at short lessons, or you will forget all Miss Grimshawe taught you. But long ones would be tiresome just at first, so we will not

talk about another governess till after Christmas. Till then we will have easy little lessons every day together, and I shall find out how much my little girls know, and what sort of teaching they want; and they will get broken in to steady ways again, and be ready for real work next year."

The children capered and danced, and life seemed to be changed to them. No more Miss Grimshawe; a beautiful mamma to love and care for them; a home where papa and mamma were to live with them as other children's parents lived; and perhaps some live pets about the place too—it seemed too good to be true.

And yet it was all true; and only the next evening, as they sat at tea in their nursery, they heard a curious snorting and blowing, and Letty started to her feet, crying,—

"That's Bill—that's dear Bill! I should know his sweet voice anywhere!"

She flung open the door, and sure enough there was Bill, tugging mamma along by a string, and snorting like a grampus all the while. Mamma's face was flushed and smiling, and as she let go her hold upon the lead, and Bill and Letty rushed into each other's arms as it were, she said smilingly to the children,—

"Lady Adair will be very pleased to let you keep Bill till Caspar is well enough to have him in his room. It will be a kindness to the poor dog, who is

pining sadly for his little master. But Pat thinks he will not pine any more if he has the 'little ladies' to comfort him."

"Oh how delightful!" cried all the children in a breath; and Betty looked up and added eagerly,—

"Then have you seen Lady Adair, mamma?"

"Yes, dear. She kindly called this afternoon, and I spoke to her about Bill; so we sent for him, and Pat brought him round. She was very glad for him to be comforted by somebody."

"And is Caspar getting better?"

"Yes; but it will probably be still a long time before he can bear any noise or talking or light. He has to be kept quite quiet, and that is a good thing for all the bruises and strains his poor little body got when the wall fell. They have had a clever doctor from London down to see him, and he says that when the head has got right everything else will have mended, and Caspar will be able then to get up and enjoy himself."

"How nice!" cried Letty. "But will it be a long time first?"

"Rather a long time for little people, I am afraid. But we must try to be patient, and we can all of us ask God to bless all that the doctors are doing, so that he may recover faster;" and mamma looked down upon the four eager little faces with a very sweet smile.

"Will *you* pray for Caspar too?" asked Letty,

slipping her hand into that of the new mother. "We always do; but I'm sure it would help if you did too."

"We must none of us ever forget to think of him when we pray," said mamma gently; "for perhaps, if it had not been for little Caspar's brave presence of mind, I might have had only three little girls to love now instead of four."

The children looked very grave for a moment; but then a new idea struck Letty, and she cried out eagerly,—

"O mamma, and is the deadly feud over now?"

The light of laughter was in mamma's eyes as she looked at Letty and said,—

"I never heard about a deadly feud, my dear. What do you mean?"

"Oh, didn't they tell you? But there has been a feud—a very deadly feud—between the Adairs and the Tyrrels, oh, for hundreds and thousands of years! I don't know when it began, nor what it was about; but that's the way with feuds, you know. They don't seem to be about anything, only they're very deadly, and it makes it all interesting. That was why it was a secret for us to know Caspar. But of course, if you are going to know Lady Adair, I don't see how the feud can go on any longer."

"Nor I, dear," answered mamma, with grave lips, but with a laugh in her eyes. "So suppose we forget all about it, and remember only that Lady Adair is a

very kind and good neighbour of ours, and that little Caspar is a dear, brave little fellow, to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude."

"And that Bill is the dearest dog in all the world," added Letty, flinging her arms round his neck once again, "and that we are all going to be happy together!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CONVALESCENCE.

IT seemed to Caspar that he must have been lying there a long, long time. But he did not feel any surprise or impatience; indeed, he did not very often care to take the trouble to open his eyes. It was nicer to keep them closed against the light, and to doze and dream—he hardly knew which it was—the days away, just conscious that there were people about him, kind hands making him comfortable, gentle voices speaking over his head. He was dimly aware of this, and content in the sensation of being cared for. But most of his time was passed in a sort of dream, and he knew no difference between day and night; for whenever he opened his eyes he was not alone, though the softly-shaded light always seemed the same.

By-and-by things seemed slowly to grow clearer to him. He began to know that Mr. Coburne came sometimes and stood beside him, taking hold of his hand and looking into his eyes. Then Caspar would

smile back at him, and hear the doctor's voice saying in a kind and cheerful tone,—

"That is right, my little friend. So you know me again, do you?"

Caspar did not know he had not known before, but he did not care to try to explain, for his tongue felt very heavy; so he smiled again by way of answer, and turned on his pillows and went to sleep once more.

Now when he woke up from those long sleeps, he used to notice the different people in the room. Sometimes it was Mrs. Diggles, sometimes Pat, sometimes his grandmother herself, and very often a gentle-faced woman in white cap and apron, who seemed always to know just what he wanted, and of whom he grew to feel quite fond, even before he ever tried to speak to her.

And now Caspar began to look forward to those dainty little meals which were served up to him at regular intervals. He was allowed to sit up for a few minutes, and was no longer fed by a spoon. Now and then Cookie herself would bring up some little specially good thing on a covered plate, and Caspar would smile at her, and whisper that he was getting quite well and strong, and that she made him very nice things to eat.

He did not care to talk much yet, and nobody tried to make him; they were all contented with his smiles and little signs. Sometimes Mr. Coburne

would ask him a few questions, but nobody else did; and Caspar was grateful to them, for somehow he felt that it would worry his head to have to talk.

But every day made him feel stronger, able to look about him more, and to take note of the things he saw.

There was one thing which he got into the way of looking at very often, and by-and-by he began to wonder what it was and how it came there. It was a rather large photograph of a lady in a black dress, with a white cap on her head. So much he could see as he lay, for the picture stood upon a little stand not far from his bed. As his eyes grew stronger he made out more than this. He felt quite sure that it was a picture of the Queen; and so he used to lie looking at it for a long time together, wondering who had brought it there, and thinking about the time when he should be old enough to serve the Queen.

"If she will have me," he began at last to add, with a little sigh; "but I'm afraid I'm not brave enough for that."

It was a good while before he said anything about the picture, for, as I have said, he felt no wish to talk. His head was very queer and confused, and he felt as though the words would not come out right, and as though his head would begin to hurt him if he tried to find them too soon. But he liked to lie and look at the picture, and by-and-by he

noticed that it had some writing at the bottom. So one morning, when he felt stronger than ever he had done, so that he had asked the nurse to draw up the blind and let him sit up in bed for a little while, he held out his hand towards the photograph, and asked if he might have it to look at.

It was given into his hands, with a smile, by the nurse, and he saw that the words written underneath were "Victoria R.I."

"I knew it was the Queen," he said to himself. "I think she has a beautiful face. I do wish I could see her some day!"

Just at that moment the door opened softly, and his grandmother came in. When she saw him sitting up and smiling, she smiled too, and came and kissed him, and sat down beside him.

"I was looking at the picture, grandmother," he said. "It is the Queen, is it not?"

"Yes, my dear."

"And who sent it to me, grandmother dear?"

She looked at him with a little smile in her eyes as she said,—

"The Queen sent it to you, my dear."

Caspar gave a gasp of astonishment, and gazed wonderingly into the smiling face above him. His grandmother did not wait till he could frame his questions; she told him the tale at once.

"You remember my telling you about the friend I had who is one of the Queen's ladies? You know

you wanted me to write to her; and after you were ill I did so, and I told her about my little grandson who was so anxious to serve the Queen, but was afraid he was not brave enough. And I told her, too, how it was he had met with such a bad accident, and was lying very ill. And this lady told the story to the Queen; and about ten days ago she wrote and told me that the Queen had asked several times how the little boy was getting on, and had given her this photograph to send to him. And you see, my dear, that the Queen has written her own name underneath it. She remembered your father, Caspar—for I think the Queen forgets nobody who has ever served her faithfully; and although she is a Queen, and has hundreds of millions of subjects to rule over, yet she can remember even a little sick child, and do something to make him happy."

Caspar's eyes were shining. He suddenly took the picture and raised it to his lips.

"I should like to kiss her face, but that would be taking a liberty; but I may kiss her hand, I know, because my father told me that he did, and that most likely I should some day."

After that Caspar used to lie day after day looking at his picture, and marvelling more and more as his mind grew stronger at the wonderful story he had heard. Every morning he asked to have it put into his hands as soon as he had been washed and made neat for the day, and every day he reverently

kissed the hand in the photograph and said in his heart,—

"I *do* love the Queen. She *is* a good Queen. I will try to be a brave man, that I may serve her when I grow up."

The picture gave ample occupation to his faculties for some time to come. But there came a day when he felt strong enough to wish for something more.

"I wish Letty might come to see me," he said; and after Mr. Coburne had given his consent, Letty was summoned.

Caspar was quite alive now—white and thin and weak, of course, but without any of that tiresome feeling in his head which had made talking and thinking such a difficult matter for so long.

He looked eagerly towards the door as it slowly opened, and then a quick flush of delight rose in his face; for not only was Letty creeping in on tiptoe, but she had her arms clasped round the substantial form of Bill, who was giving vent to subdued snorts of excitement as he felt himself being brought into the presence of his little master.

What a meeting that was! Caspar had often meant to ask about Bill, but it had never come into his head at the right time, and he knew that his grandmother was not likely to let the dog come into the room when he was ill and had to keep quiet.

Sometimes he had been afraid that poor Bill must

be feeling very lonely, and he was delighted above measure to hear that he had been paying a visit at Falconer's Lodge.

"But—but what about the—the stepmother?" he whispered, suddenly remembering that that terrible being must surely have arrived by this time.

"She's not a stepmother!" cried Letty eagerly. "She's our own dear mamma, and we love her better than anybody in the world! It was she who brought Bill to stay with us."

And then Letty plunged head over heels into the whole story; and Caspar listened delightedly, watching Letty's bright, eager face and little characteristic gestures with a sense of pleasure he could hardly have explained.

Presently, when everything had been told, Letty's quick eyes fell upon the photograph; and then Caspar had to tell the wonderful story of how it had come to him, and Letty's eyes grew round with wonder and awe.

"O Caspar, isn't she kind and good! Oh, I wish I were a man, and I would fight for her too!"

"You know you are going to be my wife and a lady-in-waiting," said Caspar consolingly. "I do hope I shall grow up brave, and be able to fight for her or do whatever she wants of me."

"Why, you are brave now!" cried Letty. "Everybody says you saved Jetty's life. They all call you a little hero. I expect the Queen knows about

that too, and that she sent you her picture because of it."

Caspar had forgotten all about the falling wall and his attempt to save Jetty from harm, but Letty told him the story so graphically that he seemed to see it all afresh. His face wore a little pink flush as she extolled his bravery, for it was a new thing for Letty to make a hero of him, but he said,—

"I don't think I was really brave. I didn't have time to think about it. Perhaps if I had, I shouldn't have done it."

"But you did do it," said the practical Letty, with a shake of her head; "and everybody says you are very brave."

After that first visit, Letty was admitted very often to the sick-room, sometimes alone, but more often with one of her sisters, Bill always making one of the party.

Caspar did not want Bill back just yet. He thought it would be dull for him at home, and Letty was sure he was happy with them, and he had a great many walks and runs with the carriage; for mamma had a carriage, and drove out nearly every day, and almost always took one or two of the children with her.

Days now began to fly along very fast indeed, and something pleasant happened almost every day. Mr. Coburne's visits grew less frequent, which made Caspar feel that he was getting better, though he always

liked a little chat with the kind doctor when he came. Dr. and Mrs. Kingscote both came to see him occasionally; and one day when Letty arrived, she was leading by the hand a tall and beautiful lady, whose face was full of tenderness and kindliness; and it did not need Letty's proud explanation, "This is mamma," to tell Caspar who his visitor was.

She came and knelt down beside Caspar's sofa—for he got up every day and was partly dressed, and lay on the sofa by the fire, warmly wrapped up—and put her arm about him and kissed him on the brow and lips; and Caspar suddenly felt a wave of memory sweep over him, for that was just how mother used to kiss him in those days which seemed so far away now. And he nestled his head against the lady's shoulder, and did not try to speak or move, only hearing the soft tones of her voice as she whispered gentle words to him; and he no longer wondered at Letty's indignant disclaimer about the stepmother, or at the proud, fond way in which she always spoke of "mamma."

Presently the lady took a chair beside him, and holding his hand in hers began to talk.

"We must get you quite well for Christmas, Caspar, for we want to have a very merry one all together. You have never seen an English Christmas, and my little girls don't seem to know as much about it as they should. We must teach you all how it is done, and I shall have a little nephew of mine here to help

us; and besides that a brother too, who tells me that you and he are friends already!"

Caspar's eyes opened wide in curiosity and interest.

"Oh, please tell me who he is! Did I know him in India?"

"You came home in the same ship. Do you remember Captain Rutland?"

"Oh yes, yes!" cried Caspar excitedly. "I have so often thought about him, and wanted to see him again. It was he who first told me about the Queen—I mean about trying always to be obeying her. Is he really coming here? Is he really your brother?"

"Yes, my youngest brother, Ronald. He is home on sick-leave, and he has been staying with my eldest brother and his family. But just lately measles has broken out there amongst the little girls at home, and he told me he was going to fetch one of the boys from school, and keep Christmas somewhere with him. So I wrote and told them they must both come here and spend it with us."

Letty's eyes were glowing with excitement; she kept dancing up and down in her chair, and now she broke in eagerly,—

"Squib is his name—at least that's what they call him—and he's only been one term at school. And it will seem very hard for him not to be able to go home; but he can't because of the measles. So mamma

says we must try to make him very happy with us; and you will help us, Caspar, because you're a boy, and we're only girls. But there will be mamma, of course, and Uncle Ronald—mamma says he is our Uncle Ronald now as well as Squib's; isn't that funny?—and mamma can always make everybody happy."

Caspar was immensely surprised and pleased, and was now in the state when a little excitement was stimulating and good for him. It was very interesting that his Captain Rutland should be brother to Letty's new mamma. It was like a bit of a fairy tale, he thought, and Letty was quite of the same opinion.

"I think mamma is a sort of fairy godmother," she confided to Caspar upon another occasion. "Everything has been different since she came—even papa. He smiles at us now and plays with us, and we come down to dessert like you. I don't think the books are all lies now, for things do really happen."

Very soon after this Caspar was allowed to come downstairs for a little while every day; and though he felt very queer when first he began to walk about, he soon got over the feeling, and grew stronger on his feet every day.

"You must get out into the fresh air now as much as you can," Mr. Coburne said. "That will be the best medicine for you on all fine days." And Caspar was quite eager to carry out this prescription, and took

long drives with his grandmother almost every day.

Although December had come, the sun shone brightly, and the weather was crisp and cold without being too severe. Caspar liked to walk up and down the terrace in the sunshine, especially if Letty and one of her sisters might walk with him.

"I want to show you something," cried Letty one day, when she had come for the promenade with Bill at her heels. "You can walk as far as the ruins, can't you?"

"Oh yes," cried Caspar eagerly; and Letty, dancing along a few paces ahead, brought him to the familiar place, which somehow looked different to his eyes after this long while.

"This way! this way!" cried Letty excitedly. "Come and see the Lady's Bower; it has been built up again, and made *so* pretty. And we are to play here as much as ever we like when it's summer again. And look—look at this fine door! That's been put into the wall, so that we can come and see each other without going all the way round, or without grubbing about down the steps and through the crypt. And we've a nice path cut to it from our side of the shrubbery. It isn't a secret any longer; but then I don't think that matters any more, because there isn't any deadly feud." Letty stopped a moment, and then added reflectively, "Now I come to think of it, I'm not sure that there ever was any *very deadly*

feud, only just a little fag-end, and mamma wouldn't have a bit of it left."

One day Letty was the bearer of another exciting piece of news.

"O Caspar, Caspar! *have* you seen the pony?"

"What pony?"

"Your pony—the one you were promised. It's come, and it's such a darling; and I kissed his nose ever so many times, and he tried to kiss me back. And there's *such* a sweet little cart come with him—just to hold two. It's almost like a little sledge on wheels. And they say you are to be out in it a great deal on warm days, wrapped up in bearskins like a Russian. Oh, it will be such fun! We can play such games! You'll let me come with you sometimes, and play at being chased by wolves. I'll have a doll or two with me to throw out, and we can pretend they're our children, and we are throwing them to the wolves!"

A bloodthirsty narrative had always charms for Letty, and she could not be brought to see that throwing children to the wolves was not exactly a heroic occupation.

"They'd only be babies, you know," she explained; "and babies are no good to anybody—silly little things. Of course we wouldn't throw dear Bill. We'd die first!"

Caspar was a good deal excited about this new possession; but he was not introduced to it just yet,

for there came a few very cold days of sleet and frost, which kept him to the house, and his little friends away from him.

But one morning he awoke to find the sun shining gloriously; the birds were chirping and singing, and the arrow on the stable tower pointed almost due south.

"I can go out to-day," he said, as he discussed his breakfast with relish; and he had hardly finished before Pat came up with a beaming face, wrapped him up in his little fur-lined coat, pulled a fur cap well down over his ears, and led him away down the stairs with an air of mystery that excited Caspar to the utmost.

Out upon the steps of the hall door Pat led him, and he saw the nodding and smiling face of his grandmother looking down at him from above. But for the moment there was nothing else in sight. Then almost directly he heard the tinkle of bells, and looking eagerly about him, he descried the next moment a pretty little carriage bearing down upon him, driven by a boy who handled whip and reins in the most workmanlike manner; and beside the little boy sat Letty, glowing, laughing, exclaiming; and last of all came a tall gentleman running behind, with Bill racing at his heels.

Letty was out almost before the little carriage had stopped.

"Caspar, Caspar, look! Isn't it lovely? Isn't

Bogy a darling? Isn't everything lovely? Squib is going to teach you to drive. Squib drives and rides and does everything splendidly, and he's never afraid. It was he who called the pony Bogy. I think it's a lovely name. He's come to take you a drive now. Oh, you will so like it! Bogy goes like the wind, and the bells make it sound just like a sledge. Squib says if the snow was deep he and the carpenter could soon make the carriage into a sledge, and drive you like that."

Letty was dancing in her excitement. But for the moment Caspar had eyes only for the tall gentleman who had been running behind the sledge. His hands were in those of his friend of the steamer, and he was eagerly scanning the kind, merry face which looked much more brown and healthy than it had done on ship-board.

"Well, my little friend, so we meet again after all."

"Oh, I am so glad to see you again!" cried Caspar. "I was so glad when they said you were coming. I could hardly believe it. Doesn't it seem funny that I should have come to this place, where Letty and Betty and Jetty and Hetty live, and that you should have turned into their uncle?"

"Yes, old chap, it does seem a bit mixed, doesn't it? Suppose you take me for an uncle too. I've got so many new nieces that a nephew shovelled in won't make any manner of difference. Will you have me for your Uncle Ronald too?"

Caspar's eyes gave eloquent answer.

"That would be splendid!" he said. "I never had an uncle that I could remember."

"And he's such a nice uncle too!" chimed in Letty eagerly. "He's only been here since the day before yesterday, but we all feel as if we'd known him always; and he does tell such splendid stories—and so does Squib too. Squib's been in Switzerland, and knows lots of things, and can speak French and German just as well as English. It's such fun to hear him! Now, Caspar, do come and try your cart, and have a drive. You can pretend it's a sledge all the time, and then it seems like one. Squib will take care of you, and I want to take Uncle Ronald to see the Lady's Bower when you're gone."

Caspar turned then to look at his new possession. It was a very pretty little turn-out. The pony was a very dark brown, almost black, with a long mane and tail and very bright eyes. He had plenty of spirit, as anybody could see, but was quite docile to the sound of his driver's voice and the touch of his hands upon the reins.

Upon the driver's seat was a boy of nine or ten years, with a square, pleasant face, which was now beaming all over with pleasure at his present occupation.

"Get in, little 'un," he said, holding out his hand to Caspar. "Letty will tuck you up, and I'll take you for no end of a spin. Bogy goes like the wind on a

good road, when once you can give him his head; but he shan't go a bit faster than you like. He's a splendid mouth."

Caspar, glowing and smiling, was lifted into the sledge-like carriage, and warmly tucked up by willing hands.

"That's Squib," said Letty, by way of introduction. "Now you'll just see how he can drive."

CHAPTER XV.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS.

WHAT a drive that was, through the crisp, clear air! just a few touches of frost upon the trees to give them an added beauty, but nothing to hinder the swift-footed pony from covering the ground in his own gallant fashion.

For a while the boys were silent—Caspar half shy of his companion, and lost in admiration of his fearless and dexterous driving; Squib engrossed in his task, and delighting in the free and unfettered action of the gallant little pony, who seemed eager to fly through the keen, sunny air.

All at once he burst out suddenly and rapidly,—

"He's a splendid little fellow. You couldn't wish a better. And it isn't always ponies who are the best tempered that are the best to go. We've had plenty at home. I had one, but he never went very fast. We were great friends. You know you have to be friends with creatures, and then they will do anything for you. But Shag hadn't much go in him. Perhaps

it was because he was getting old before I had him. But now I have a horse—a real big horse of my own. He was my father's favourite hunter; but he hurt his shoulder, and now he can't carry him any more, but he can carry me. I'm awfully fond of him. That's one of the reasons I'm sorry about not going home. I shan't see Charger and Moor, and they won't understand, like people can, why I don't come back at Christmas as I promised. I wonder if they will know it is Christmas? I expect they will. They always know when it's Sunday. But then, of course, Sunday comes much oftener."

"I'll ask my grandmother to send for your horse here," said Caspar, with brightening eyes. "Perhaps then you would go out riding with me. Has Letty told you about me and the pony? But I wasn't always like that; and I'll ride Bogy if he'll let me."

"Oh, he's capital to ride!" cried Squib; "I tried him yesterday. Lady Adair asked if I would. He's first-rate. I'll show you some day; and of course I'll go out with you if you get strong enough to ride before the end of the holidays. You needn't think you'll always feel frightened. Anybody might now and then; but you'll get all right, you'll see."

"Were you ever frightened?" asked Caspar, looking admiringly into Squib's square, resolute face, and watching with admiration his dexterity with whip and reins, and his clever understanding of the pony's little whims.

"Oh yes," answered Squib, readily and frankly; "I've been frightened several times. Once was out in a thunderstorm in Switzerland, when my big dog was killed by the lightning—sometimes I find I'm shivering now when the thunder is bad; and once we got caught in a sort of avalanche of stones, and I was frightened then for a little bit. And when I went to school first I was a bit frightened in another way. There was a bullying sort of fellow in our room. He was supposed to look after us, but he just made that an excuse for bullying. We were all half afraid of him. So at last we made a league together, and just set upon him and gave him a thrashing. That settled him; he never bully-ragged us any more. I think the best thing if one is frightened is just to say one *won't* be—go straight at it tooth and nail, and don't give in till you're master."

Caspar enjoyed his drive very much. He asked his new friend about himself, about his home, and about his school-life, which sounded all of it very interesting. Then Squib wanted to know about India, and if Caspar had ever seen tigers walking about, or had found snakes curled up in his bed or bath; and altogether the time passed so quickly and pleasantly, that he could hardly believe the two hours were really over when they passed the park gates again. Then Squib put the reins in his hands, and let him drive up to the hall door; and Caspar did not feel a bit afraid, but managed the turn-in at the inner

gate very nicely, and drew up quite in style at the portico, to be rewarded by a smile and nod from his grandmother, who had heard the sound of the bells, and was on the lookout for his return.

"Squib *is* such a nice, kind boy, grandmother," cried Caspar, who looked quite rosy and glowing; "he drove me beautifully, and he tells such lots of stories. And he's going to ride with me if you'll let his horse come and stay here. I must ride again now I've got that beautiful pony. I felt I wanted to to-day. Squib has never been afraid of an animal in his life. I asked him, and he couldn't remember ever being; though he said he was sometimes frightened of other things. He doesn't boast or brag a bit. Will you let us invite his nice horse here, grandmother? I think I should like to ride again if Squib rode with me."

"Well, my dear, we will get something for your friend to ride," answered Lady Adair, smiling. "I am very glad you have a boy companion for these holidays. It will make Christmas a merrier season for you. You must think of some way in which we can entertain your little friends. Would you like a big Christmas-tree, with nice presents for them all, or a a children's ball, or what?"

Caspar stood lost in thought for a short time, his face as bright as the sunshine without. Then he suddenly exclaimed,—

"I should love to see a big tree; I never had one

in India. Mamma said they only grew in England. I had presents in my stocking, though, every year. Santa Claus comes all round the world, you know. But I should like to have dressing-up too. Some children in India once had dressing-up and acting. I was too little to help; but I watched it, and it was so nice. Letty would like that; and Squib could help us. He could do some of the talking. Don't you think that would be nice, grandmother? In the attic there are such lots and lots of beautiful things for dressing-up. Mrs. Diggles shows them to me on wet days. We could make ourselves look so mediaeval, and that's what Letty likes more than anything."

"Then we will have a Christmas-tree, and charades afterwards," answered Lady Adair, with a delightful finality in her tone; and from that day forward Caspar's life became quite a whirl of small and delightful secrets and surprises.

"My surprise for grandmother is to show her that I can ride without being afraid," he confided to Squib, whom he took into his confidence with regard to the various presents preparing for the four little girls. There were to be presents for Squib too; but Caspar did not say so, and Squib never seemed to think of such a thing himself. He was very pleased to hear what his little cousins were to have, and was full of delightful suggestions when consulted. He drove Caspar out regularly every fine day, and on less fine ones took the little girls out in turns; for Bogy got

very fretful if he missed his daily run. Caspar was learning to drive quite fearlessly now; and upon one bright afternoon, when Bogy had been quieted down by a sharp run in the morning, he watched Squib ride him round and round the paddock, and then made his own first attempt at regaining his lost courage on horseback. Squib helped him up and stood beside him. In quite a few minutes Caspar was ready to go alone, and let Bogy trot round and round the little enclosure.

"I don't feel a bit afraid," he cried delightedly. "O Squib, do ask coachman to saddle you his horse, and take me out on the road with you."

There were several stablemen looking on furtively at the little master taking his first ride after his long illness, and now they all flew to do his bidding. In a very short time a horse was brought out, and Squib was on his back in a moment, handling him in that easy, masterly way which so won the admiration of Caspar when watching him drive.

Bogy tossed his head at the approach of a big companion, but when Squib said, "Steady, steady, old fellow!" he grew quite docile again. Caspar's face was in a glow of pleasure, and he made no remonstrance when a leading-rein was fastened to Bogy's bit and handed to Squib. Indeed, he felt safer that it should be so, though Squib said as they started,—

"I shan't use it unless you want me to. I don't believe you're going to feel afraid one bit."

And before they were fairly clear of the park Caspar found that he wasn't at all badly nervous; and very soon he got so interested in some of Squib's stories, that he forgot altogether to wonder whether Bogy was going to shy or kick, or upset him in any way, and found himself trotting along quite gaily and fearlessly, laughing and chattering as composedly as possible.

But he did not tell his grandmother anything about it when he got in flushed and triumphant. He was going to wait till he was quite sure that his confidence and horsemanship had come back before he made any sort of boast about it.

But it was capital having Squib. The children had the most delightful times together, with Bill and Bogy for companions. All the little girls began to learn to ride in the paddock under Squib's instruction. He was so kind and gentle with them and with the pony that even Jetty soon ceased to be afraid. As for Letty, she did not know what fear meant, and was "a regular little brick," as Squib used to tell her, to her great delight. Never had such peals of mirth and laughter been heard round and about Falconer's Hall and Falconer's Lodge as during these Christmas holidays.

And the preparation for the charades was so delightful too! The attic provided wonderful costumes, which Nurse Deborah and Mrs. Diggles, under the kind superintendence of the new mamma, quickly altered to suit the stature of little people. Letty

was a born dramatist, and inspired all the rest; and Squib showed to great advantage as a sturdy officer or knight or executioner. When the mood was on him, he could talk very well as well as act, and Letty was quite sure that when the night came he would do everything most beautifully.

Christmas Day itself fell on a Sunday this year, so the little people's party at the Hall was to be on Christmas Eve, and great was the excitement as the day drew near. Squib was almost more excited than anybody just at the last. He had been mysteriously missing for the best part of one day, and mamma was also missing, and Uncle Ronald, that very same day. Letty quite scolded him when he appeared, flushed and radiant, at dusk; but he wouldn't tell her where he had been, nor what he had been doing, though she coaxed him with all her might.

At last came the long-expected morning of Christmas Eve, and the excited children were up as soon as the sun—which, after all, was not so very early. All the while the nursery breakfast was being discussed Squib kept bursting out laughing, sometimes jumping up and running to the window, and then coming back with his face full of glee.

The presents were all to be on the great tree that was preparing in the library at the Hall. The children had asked that everything might be tied upon it or put round it; and now it seemed a long time to wait till dark.

But soon after breakfast was over and done with, and they had begun to rehearse their parts for the charades of the evening, Squib suddenly rushed to the door and threw it open, and they heard mamma's voice calling to them from somewhere below to come down together all at once, but to put their hats and coats on first.

There was a great scramble at that, and then a headlong rush downstairs. Squib gave a "view halloo" as he headed the procession, and Letty felt sure that he, at least, knew what was coming.

The hall door was standing open. Papa and Uncle Ronald were out on the steps, and mamma stood in the hall in her long fur-lined cloak, holding out her hands to the little ones, her face all beaming with smiles.

"Darlings," she said, "there were two presents too big to be hung upon the tree, so we have got them here for you. One is for Betty and Jetty, and one for Letty and Hetty; and I do not think there will be any quarrelling over them, but I think you will love them and make them happy, and have a great deal of pleasure from them."

Out rushed the children, brimming over with excited curiosity, and next moment Letty's shrill voice had risen in a scream of rapture; for there at the door stood two handsome little ponies, saddled and bridled for little girl riders. Letty had buried her face in the flowing mane of the nearest, and was hugging and kissing him to her heart's content.

Ponies for them to ride — ponies of their very own! Had anything so delightful ever happened in all the world before? Mamma had to be hugged, and papa too, and Uncle Ronald, who had helped to choose the pretty creatures. And whilst they were still standing round, laughing, exclaiming, shrieking for joy, up came Caspar, mounted on Bogy, a groom beside him leading the horse that Squib usually rode when they went out together.

"Please will you come and ride with me?" he asked; "I want to show grandmother that I can do it now. I'm not afraid any more. And it would be so nice to go all together!"

Betty and Jetty whispered to mamma to let the twins have the first ride. Jetty was not quite so brave as the others, and Betty was always an unselfish little mortal. Mamma whispered back to her that soon there would be a little carriage for her to drive Jetty about in, and she held the elder pair by the hand whilst Uncle Ronald mounted the little ones and sent them off with eager, glowing faces under the care of Squib.

Letty could hardly keep her spirits from bubbling over. She laughed and sparkled and danced up and down in her saddle; and her spirit seemed to be caught by all the party, ponies included. They had a famous canter across the park—Squib taking Hetty under his special care, for he had her on the leading-rein that Caspar now despised: whilst Letty

raced on ahead with Caspar at her side, both alike eager, and strangers to fear, laughing and urging on their mettlesome little steeds, till, breathless and delighted, they paused at the limits of the park, when Letty cried rapturously,—

"Oh, wasn't that splendid! Caspar, you aren't afraid now; so you'll be able to be a knight of the Queen's by-and-by."

Bill, wildly excited, raced alongside, feeling that this sort of thing was just what suited him; and when they were trotting all together along the road more soberly, Caspar came out with a piece of very interesting information.

"Have you heard about the governess?" he asked.

"No," said Letty, with a little grimace. "I don't think we want a governess; we like lessons with mamma much better."

"Oh, but she wouldn't always have time," said Caspar; "and besides, she has got a very nice lady who is coming. She won't live in the house; she's going to have the little house just outside the gates of the park with the rose bushes in the garden. And she'll come every day, and I'm going to have lessons with you instead of with a tutor alone. I shall have to go to school by-and-by, but not yet, and so I can do my lessons with you. Won't that be nice? And grandmother is having a room at my house made into a big sort of playroom and gymnasium, and you are to come and play there and do drilling

every day. Pat is to teach us; he was a sergeant, you know, once, and knows all about it. And now we shall ride together too! Oh, we shall be so very happy! It's better now than the secret and the deadly feud!"

Caspar knew that his grandmother had to drive out that morning, and he timed their return so that they might pass her carriage as it neared the house. It was standing at the door of a cottage as they got back to the village, and Lady Adair came out just as the little cavalcade was riding up. Caspar, with a flushed and happy face, pulled off his cap and waved it, clapping his heels into Bogy's sides to make him break into a gallop. And so they all whirled past Lady Adair, she looking on with a proud, fond smile, and waving her hand in recognition; whilst the cottagers who were grouped about to watch the children go by smiled and wagged their heads, saying,—

"Little Sir Caspar looks another creature since he has had the little ladies from the Lodge to play with."

There could be no doubt about that in the mind of any of those who watched the children that evening, first acting their charades with a zest and cleverness which delighted the grown-up audience, and then grouped about the wonderful tree, which seemed to produce everything each child most desired from its wonderful boughs. Surely never had been such a tree known before! Even Squib, who had grown up

with such things, declared, as he gazed at the array of things before him—knife, silver-mounted hunting-crop, new acme skates, a book about Swiss mountaineering, a tool-box, and sugar-plums in boxes of every shape and size—that he had never known a more splendid tree in all his life.

The little girls, unused to presents, were almost bewildered by the number and beauty of the gifts handed to them. Even Letty's tongue was almost still for once as she nursed her treasures and turned them over and over in her hands. Such books! such a desk! such a wonderful work-box, that would make even sewing almost a pleasant occupation! She too had a riding-whip, a smart little cap, and a photograph in a frame of dear Bill sitting up on his haunches and staring at her out of the picture as though he could really see!

Jetty was in ecstasies over the "sweetest darling of a kitten that ever lived"—a long-haired Persian, with a lovely soft coat, and a tail which at Bill's approach already swelled to unbelievable dimensions. She could hardly examine the rest of her gifts, so absorbed was she in this soft living treasure.

The grown-up people withdrew to let the children discuss their properties together, compare notes, and enjoy themselves in their own way.

Caspar had piled his upon a table, and stood turning them over and over. Toys and books and sweetmeats in attractive array lay before him; but his eyes

were fastened upon a large silver filigree frame, and suddenly exclaiming, "I'm sure it will just fit!" he rushed out of the room, and returned with his precious picture of the Queen.

It did just fit, and the little boy stood gazing earnestly at it.

"Look, Squib!" he exclaimed, drawing him aside; "doesn't she look splendid! It ought to be gold and diamonds to be good enough for *her*. Shall we kiss hands again and swear fealty? And see here what the servants have given me! Isn't it nice of them?"

As he spoke he took up a long folding case which contained a dozen photographs, and each of these was a portrait of the Queen at a different stage of her long career—the first as a child, then one as a young girl, and so on till one of the latest for which she had sat.

"See, it will stand up, so that I can see them all. I do like to look at them so much. Squib, you and I will serve the Queen when we grow up, won't we? She's the best queen that ever lived in all the world!"

"Let's give three cheers for her!" cried Letty; and three times three resounded through the vaulted library with all the ardour of six pairs of vigorous lungs.

"Now one for grandmother!" cried Caspar.

"Now one for mamma and papa!" screamed Letty.

"And one for Uncle Ronald and Squib!" added

Jetty; and the roof rang again to the vigorous sounds, which brought the elders back smiling and inquiring.

"We're only cheering for the Queen and all the nice people," explained Letty, running eagerly forward towards Lady Adair, who was standing with her hand upon mamma's shoulder. "You are some of the nice people—the nicest in all the world; and we have had just the nicest, happiest Christmas that ever was!"

THE END.